

Beyond ubuntu and decoloniality: toward a precarity-based African existentialist mobility framework

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ABSTRACT

This article is conceived against the background of value systems that seek to understand and represent African reality vis-à-vis African migration. The two major systems of thought to be evaluated against the realities of migration are ubuntu and decoloniality. I seek to suggest that while these theories seek to account for experiences in modern Africa, there is a possible system of thought that may comprehensively capture African reality. Precarity, as a system of thought, speaks most directly to African reality as well as the motivating factors behind some of the characteristics of African migration. The argument for this position will be made against the migrant youth we interviewed in Johannesburg. In addition, I will seek to show that religious belonging plays a fundamental role in the formation of identity and a sense of belonging among migrant youths.

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Introduction

Migration is a defining feature of African life, yet dominant frameworks like ubuntu and decoloniality underspecify its nuances. Ubuntu, rooted in communitarian ethics (Ramose 1999), emphasizes collective harmony (Menkiti 1984), while decoloniality attributes Africa's struggles to colonial legacies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015). Both ubuntu and decoloniality can be viewed as normative, epistemic and political tools that seek to theorize and explain African experiences in contemporary times. They seek to address how issues of belonging and borders can be addressed by insisting on conceptualization and realization of relationality and oneness (in the case of ubuntu) and how damaging the colonial episode has been to these experiences (in the case of decoloniality). By extension, they seek to show how citizenship and exclusion can be understood through experiences of being African in contemporary times. Through conceptual analysis, supported by sentiments expressed in interviews with migrants, this article seeks to show that the concept of precarity is a more comprehensive tool when considering issues of African migration. This article advances the primary focus of this special issue of developing

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Southern theories of migration while at the same time advancing an understanding of how young people navigate structural inequalities found within their environments through religion and spirituality (see Pasura et al. 2026).

This article is divided into seven parts. In the first part, I outline the sense of migration I am working with to make my case for precarity. In the second section, I offer an outline of ubuntu's core claims as a community centred ethic that cares for the welfare of all. In the third section, I outline the major claims of decolonial thinking as a counter to the operations of colonial powers and their lingering effect on formerly colonized territories. In the fourth and fifth sections, I offer some reasons why both ubuntu and decoloniality underspecify experiences of migration. In the sixth section, I offer a reading of reality through precarity. In the seventh section, I offer a description of what I call zones of hope as exemplified in the experiences of the youths who were the subjects of this study. However, in the section immediately below, I specify the methodology undertaken by this article.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger multi-sited study that investigates the religious and spiritual experiences of youths in the UK (London and Birmingham), Nigeria (Lagos), South Africa (Johannesburg), and Zimbabwe (Harare). This article is based on interviews conducted in Johannesburg between June 2024 and February 2025. In total, 35 participants were interviewed: 23 young transnational migrants from Nigeria and Zimbabwe residing in Johannesburg, and 12 key informants (foreign migrants and South Africans). 34 participants identified as Christian (mainline and Pentecostal) and one as Muslim. These qualitative interviews targeted youths between the ages of 18 and 35 of Nigerian and Zimbabwean descent who reside in Johannesburg. Using qualitative methodology to collect data, researchers relied on biographical interviews as well as ethnographic observation. Purposive sampling was used to find interviewees, followed by snowballing, which led to further interviewees. Iterative thematic analysis was used to arrive at interpretations of data, with precarity as a more nuanced theoretical approach to migration and spirituality/religion as important for interviewees' identity formation.

Statement of ethics

In South Africa, approval was issued by the University of Pretoria Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 04888929; HUM024/0923). All participants received an information sheet and provided informed consent prior to participation, including explicit consent for audio-recording where applicable and consent to publish anonymized data (including quotations). To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout and identifying details are minimized.

Understanding the sense of migration

Migration is multi-faceted and lends itself to a multiplicity of patterns (Talleraas 2022). How it works out for each individual and family is mostly unique. Yet there is a way in which one could look at the migration of certain people as following a general pattern. It is, therefore, important that I spell out what sort of migration I have in mind and how that sort of

migration is synonymous with my intention in this article. It is the sort of migration that separates families while appearing to be providing solutions to their immediate existential conditions that are created by the multiple problems confronting Africa (Mawire 2020). It is a migration undertaken by people who are seeking to sell their labour to improve their lot (see World Economic Forum 2019), or what Marongedze and Chitando call *kufambira* (2026). It is characterized by movement that normally starts with one family member, followed by other family members. It could also be the case that some family members are disqualified from attempting the migration process as they are either too old or have some other exempting cause from applying for a visa. I suggest that we must be interested in the migration that is undertaken because of the failure of African states to provide opportunities for their citizens to enjoy all of life's prospects (Abidde 2021; Betts 2013). It is a result of the dysfunction that has become synonymous with everyday existence in Africa. It is about how paralysis, misrule, oppression, mass impoverishment, and absolute neglect of the citizenry have been made the daily reality of government operation. It was Peter M. Lewis (2006) who described it as a collapsed state.

This daily operation negatively affects all citizens from different stations in life, leading to the decision that home is no longer a viable option. This idea has been well captured by the *japa* syndrome – coined from the Yoruba, which means to flee or escape from Nigeria in search of better opportunities (Okunade and Awosusi 2023; Ikpi and Williams 2026). It is a throwing in of all one has to take up whatever is available elsewhere. It is seen in people who have nothing to lose, right up to medical doctors giving up on their practice, for example, to be security guards in European countries. It is a terrible mix of Africa's most skilled with Africa's very ordinary and everyday people. In attempting to understand this migratory practice, one has to diagnose the causes as not lying anywhere but within Africa's failed social, economic and governance systems (Ifaka 2022). The various instabilities have been created and made to bear on African people.

Ubuntu and migration

Ubuntu has been popularized, on the continent, as an authentic mode of reflecting on reality and how people interact with each other both as an ideal and as a fact (Okoro 2015). While many things can be said about ubuntu, there is one common fundamental attribute that defines it. Ubuntu is about the welfare of the people in the community (Chitando 2024; Chuwa 2014). Ubuntu captures this reality by emphasizing the collective identity of the individual (Ajitoni 2024). This idea of collectivity is, essentially, communitarian in nature with emphasis on the belief that the good of the individual does not lie in the identification and function of some individual attribute, but in the success of each individual as a member of a particular group (Ewuoso and Hall 2019; Munyaka and Motlhabi 2019). In its essential characterization, ubuntu is about harmony that is expected to exist between individuals and their communities (Metz 2007). Hence, Mike Boon writes: "The heritage of the philosophy that comes to us through our traditional African roots is *ubuntu*: morality, humaneness, compassion, care, understanding and empathy. It is one of sharing and hospitality, of honesty and humility. Simply put, it is the ethic and interaction that occurs in the extended family" (1998, 31).

An important consideration would be to ask where the common good comes from or what its grounds are. Mogobe B. Ramose appears to offer the answer when he extends

relationality to politics in these terms: “The relational context speaks to two important philosophical perspectives which will be shown to be significant elements of traditional African political culture. These elements are: (i) the recognition of the oneness rather than the unity of being” (2005, 99).

What can be drawn from the foregoing is how ubuntu moves from a personal value to a shared value and ultimately to a political value. What is important is how the individual’s participation in the making of social harmony ends up as a version of human equality, namely, oneness. Even for prominent thinkers who do not use the term ubuntu, such as Kwame Gyekye (1997) and Kwasi Wiredu (1980), the values of oneness and consensus as expressed by Ramose are fundamental to African identity.

Scholars who have applied ubuntu to migration have tended to focus on the features outlined above to call for its application in migration policies and practices. Mokeke P. Sebola (2019), for example, bemoans the lack of application of ubuntu to immigration policies, with a firm argument that if such an application were to occur, most problems with integration would disappear. While other thinkers admit that there could be several barriers to the successful integration of migrants, particularly in South Africa, they still maintain that ubuntu can play a pivotal role in such integration (Vhumbunu, Adetiba, and Khanyile 2025). Mutsa Murenje (2020) sees ubuntu as having potential in addressing xenophobia as a barrier to integration. Xenophobia has been a source of distress where integration is concerned in South Africa. While Murenje clearly articulates the problems foreigners face in South Africa, starting with xenophobia itself and followed by abuse, discrimination and scapegoating for crime (Murenje 2020, 96), he insists that attention must be given to ubuntu as a possible response. The same call is made by Udoh James Akpan and Sazelo Michael Mkhize (2022), who see ubuntu as having the potential to be used as a language that unifies all Bantu in the face of xenophobia. John Sanni provides an interesting reading of ubuntu in the ethics of migration as operating between the paradigms of being seen or not being seen. Migrants can become either, depending on their situation. While conceding that ubuntu can represent both visibility and invisibility, he still favours ubuntu as providing “the condition for visibility ... based on a commitment to human flourishing” (2025, 56). On the other hand, Muchanyarei (2020) is quite hopeful with the significance of ubuntu as it shows itself in how children of those who have migrated are cared for by relatives. This act of extended family integration and care is taken to be evidence of how ubuntu values are still lived out even in the sphere of migration.

However, not all thinkers agree on the efficacy of ubuntu. Molly Manyonganise (2024), for example, argues that in respect of migration, ubuntu offers the same result for both those who migrate and those who choose to stay. The end result, for Manyonganise, is that migrants and those who stay ultimately experience the inhospitability of their respective environments. Those who stay are constantly faced with the home challenges that made their compatriots migrate, while those who have left are faced with challenges such as xenophobia and a lack of integration. On the other hand, M.O. Dassah (2015) sees continued acts of xenophobia in South Africa as evidence of ubuntu’s failure to transform itself from mere proclamations into actual deeds. Despite these animadversions, ubuntu is generally seen as a viable frame of thought and African experience that has the capacity to positively influence experiences of migration.

Decoloniality and migration

The leading contemporary proponent of decoloniality on the African continent, sums it as follows:

Decoloniality names a cocktail of insurrectionist-liberatory projects and critical thoughts emerging from the ex-colonized epistemic sites like Latin America, Caribbean, Asia, Middle East, and Africa; it seeks to make sense of the position of ex-colonized peoples within the Euro-America-centric, Christian-centric, patriarchal, capitalist, hetero-normative, racially hierarchized and modern world system that came into being in the fifteenth century. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 489)

He argues that the basis of decoloniality is the realisation that the current world order is asymmetrical while being sustained by colonial power relations as well as epistemological orders that seek to continue to produce Africans who hate themselves while admiring and liking Europe and America, which does not like them in return (ibid). Thus he seeks to understand the problem through a triad of coloniality of power (how current global power was constructed and made symmetrical), coloniality of knowledge (which seeks to understand how knowledge is produced and what knowledge is prioritized) and coloniality of being (which seeks to restore the original mode of being African).

Colonialism, agreeably, altered the course of Africa in ways that are unimaginable and probably unalterable. According to decoloniality, what is important, at this juncture, is to understand how the episode of colonialism has continued to affect Africa. In many ways, it is claimed, Africa is all the worse because forces of colonialism have found ways of replicating themselves in order to keep Africa down. This idea of keeping Africa down has many aspects to it, ranging from epistemologies (Mitova 2023) to how trade is done (Chambwe 2023), from language decolonization (Boucher 2022) to advocating delinking Africa from its former colonizers (Baregu 1988). The idea of decolonization can be separated into two stages. The first stage can be described as the political struggle against colonialism, or the fight for independence. This was mainly done with a clear political intent and organization to bring about local rule and self-determination. The major aim was to ensure political independence. With political independence, it was supposed to follow that all other forms of freedom would be attained. These freedoms would range from economic to cultural. Africans would eventually be freed from all colonial influence. The second episode is academic. It is to be seen in the writings of postcolonial thinkers (Chinweizu 1975; 1987; wa Thiong'o 1986). While there is a different take on decolonization, these writers suggest that it is a necessary process which must be undertaken to ensure that the epistemologies and practices of African people are sufficiently freed of colonial influence. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) divides these episodes into five. The four are political, and the fifth is assigned to the post-2010 student, Rhodes-Must-Fall uprisings, at South African universities, which quickly spread to other parts of the world.

Scholars who have used the notion of decolonialism have relied on the basic assumptions of decoloniality to make a case for opening up the migration of Africans to formerly colonial metropolises. E. Tendayi Achiume (2019) insists on the rights of Africans to migrate to former colonial territories as part of the decolonial project. Ionela Vlase (2024) supports the decolonial approach as having the capacity to unlock numerous challenges associated with migration. Some of those dynamics, for Norman Pinduka (2023), are based on Eurocentric views that address refugees as people of concern. This view is supported by Parvati

Raghram (2026), who sees problems associated with migration as rooted in modernity, which in turn is sponsored by the Enlightenment. In order to deal effectively with the order of modernity, which emphasizes othering, Raghram suggests what he calls unruly modernity, which would be more open to migration as a normal practice. Such practices would be in keeping with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) challenge of the notion of borders, especially how they are used to discriminate against Africans while favouring Europeans as having the right to be non-visa bearing in the name of tourism and expertise.

The core issues with the decolonial approach are described by Joshua Kalemba (2022) as associated with the views that young Africans have of associating so-called developed countries, such as Australia, to make those developmental opportunities available to them. However, such developmental opportunities are not always guaranteed, as some of the territories they target could be encountering problems of their own. This attitude can only be overcome by what Kudakwashe Vanyoro (2024) identifies as chronopolitics. This is characterized by structural changes as opposed to relational changes. Such changes will lead to Africans rethinking the idea of their future as lying in Europe.

Beyond ubuntu

The idea of ubuntu as a social, moral, and political way of life for Africans is quite popular both in scholarly writings (see Mboti 2014) and ordinary talk. The key characteristic of ubuntu is care for the other, as well as striving for the creation of social harmony. What makes that social harmony possible is the regard that individuals have for each other's well-being. At the core of that regard is the belief that humans' interests, in community, are closely intertwined. That close interconnection is responsible for how individuals create their own identity. They create that identity through their close association with others. This belief leads to the claims of oneness, hence statements such as "I am because we are and since we are, therefore, I am" (Mbiti 1969, 106). At the core of the success of ubuntu is social integrity. There must be viable structures that exist to enable the community to function in tandem with individual aspirations and relations. However, African communities and societies have been going through several transformations such that the traditional factors that enabled societies to thrive are under severe strain (see Nwobodu 2022). Due to a multiplicity of factors such as increased urbanization, unrest, as well as economic hardships, the valuing of communal mores has disappeared to a large extent. A good example is given by Rosalind Shaw, who, in her study of the Temne people of Sierra Leone, found that they had altered their behaviour because of their experience of war. Significantly, they had lost trust in each other and had resorted to hiding information about themselves from each other. Shaw characterizes interactions amongst people as only eliciting half of their true being. This is a result of the distrust that was sown during the war. While one can view Shaw's (2000) study as extreme in that it was done in a war situation, a study in a rural area of Chivi in Zimbabwe has found that the introduction of mobile money has negatively impacted relations among villagers (Gukurume and Mahiya 2020). What is significant about this study is that it shows how modernized ways of handling money can have a negative impact on members' interpersonal relations, even in communities that have close approximations to traditional societies. This indicates a threat to harmony, which is a central feature of ubuntu.

A second criticism of ubuntu can be conceived more as theoretical. What ubuntu theorists should really acknowledge is that what they are theorizing is a traditional system of existence. It emerges from simple societies that were coordinated along principles of co-operation and co-existence. In simple traditional African societies, life was simple and not so different between members of the same society. Division of labour and other necessary duties were organized to ensure maximum co-operation for maximum returns. These practical needs led to the development of the spirit of ubuntu, as well as all accompanying values of co-operation. In these societies, all people were enjoined by their sense of community, which gave them their individual identity (Ikuenobe 2015). This would have placed obligations of care as well as desires to maintain good relations. These societies would have put a premium on these values as they ensured that society was coherent and well-run. It is not an exaggeration to claim that traditional African societies were organized as single ethnic societies for which it was easy to develop a coherent communitarian system as everyone had sufficiently strong bonds which made relationality possible. Those who theorize on ubuntu do so not because ubuntu is the best theory that captures African reality. It is not the best because there is no finiteness to what the best possible theories could be. They do so simply because it is an African tradition that they wish to retain. Indeed, that system is of a specific place and time, yet the desire to co-opt it or make it an overarching truth of Africanness is not steeped in fact. It is a result of the intellectual construction of the best possible world that bears testimony to the credibility of past African practices (see Mungwini 2011).

Beyond decoloniality

In respect of decoloniality, migration presents at least one considerable challenge to its main thesis. We may recall that decoloniality is premised on the need to de-centre the West since it is responsible for the politics of subjugation and epistemological dominance. However, with migration, what are we to make of movement by Africans to that very West in the hope of finding their own salvation? What are we also to make of migration within Africa, where migrants face discrimination, such as xenophobia? The latter is particularly true for African migrants in South Africa. In respect of the former, what this migration shows is that there are no definite lines of the West and Africa standing in a relationship of obvious tension whereby Africans have to necessarily perceive the West as the source of problems. The relationship between the West and its former colonies might be more complicated than the imperative to de-centre. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1997) points out that, as Africans engage in anti-colonial projects, they come to form what he calls a worldview of the West. Clearly, decoloniality has a view of the West as the problem to be de-centered. Yet Eze expresses an important question when he asks, "... how does our sense of the West distort our sense of ourselves and of our traditions?" (1997, 341). He further goes on to argue that what we say against the West also reflects as much about us. For Eze, as we are caught up in the contradictions that have been generated by our own unfulfilled dreams and hopes of independence, we then make moves to absolutise the West, and this leads down the path of a propaganda that is "described as seductive yet harmful" (ibid., 343). This, for Eze, then results in the creation of a social imaginary, which he equates to the worldview and characterizes as a zone through which reality comes to us. That zone contains both powers of myth and utopia as well as facts of

our reality yet “it is the field of the imaginary representations that carries the heaviest weight in the determination of conduct and collective orientation. Thus, when this “zone” – the zone of the social imaginary – is “distorted” or “diseased” and “inflamed,” our actions and “knowledge” become systematically distorted as well. Are we surprised, therefore, that our will to freedom is riddled with inconsistencies that have rendered us an enigma – even to ourselves?” (ibid, 343–344).

It is important to take Eze’s warning seriously as it represents an accurate reading of the African situation. As anti-colonial thinkers target the West as the problem, what they leave out is how Africa has played a part in its own derailing since independence. One could ask what it is that decolonists are saying about us in their targeting of the West. It could be the case, as Eze suggests, that this target is born out of a number of frustrations with both being a post-colony as well as our own failures post-independence. This frustration may lead to a disingenuous preference for that which is seductive. Yet in its capacity to seduce, one must also not be oblivious of its dangers. Disingenuousness’s danger in this case is that it becomes something that undoes Africans’ ability to be sincere about their situation. That situation will also include the failure of Africans to be hospitable to each other, as witnessed in acts of xenophobia and associated discrimination. One could ask to what those acts are owed. It surely cannot be due to the fact of colonial powers’ continued interference with Africa. Hence, in the next section, I attempt to provide a theoretical reading of Africa that is more plausible in reflecting the ordinary experience of everyday Africa.

Reading reality through precarity

This section uses precarity to read Johannesburg-based migrant youth experiences of insecurity, exclusion, and belonging in a xenophobia-prone context. I suggest that what can be attempted is reading African reality in general, and in relation to migration, is a concept of precarity. “It is understood here as a social positioning of insecurity and is linked to processes of racial Othering. It is, indeed, well known that due to the violent institution of slavery, the barbarity of colonialism, and the economic anxieties in the global South as a result of structural adjustment programs, the identity of black people transnationally has always been that of a people-at-risk” (Makina 2019, 206–207).

If this description is correct, we can see how African existence has been deeply coloured by negative experience, such that whatever attempt is undertaken to extricate it from its current situation does not succeed.

Judith Butler’s (2004) discussion on precarity is interesting for the distinction it makes between precariousness and precarity. She argues that all our lives are precarious. This means that we live without the certainty of knowing what will happen to us. Bad things may happen to us, such as falling terribly sick or having some other misfortune. This sort of precariousness is something that all human beings have to deal with. Precarity, on the other hand, refers to a situation of being trapped in a life of hopelessness where your station is terrible (Ruti 2017), without knowing how to escape it. It is to live a life where you do not know whether those in charge of your life care or do not care. I suggest that this sort of experience is one that is associated with millions of people on the African continent. Ranging from those caught in unending cycles of violence, such as civil wars, to those who are forced to live under unyielding dictatorships, to those who are forced to scrape a living from the edges of cities and towns.

The fact that Africa is the most underdeveloped continent in the world (Siyum 2018) is not just an abstract statement that is generated by crunching figures (Omomowo 2018). The underdevelopment has a face, and the people behind those faces do feel the stress and harm of being in the least developed place on earth. Children do go hungry, adults feel useless, some citizens are abused by the state machinery, and there is a lot of dissatisfaction about this or that aspect of the people's living conditions.

This situation is even more poignant for migrants. This is affirmed by some of the findings made from interviews we had with migrant youths, of Nigerian and Zimbabwean descent, in Johannesburg. Faced with different problems ranging from challenges in accessing legal identity documents to issues of integration characterized by xenophobia and other stigmas, their situation is one of an insecure existence. Yet in all these challenges, they do have hope and that hope is seen in the ways they strive to move in order to change their lives. While this move is physical, it is also in many ways a spiritual reckoning. It is, firstly, a journey of faith. A journey undertaken with the belief that there are powers that are going to favour the individual and make all things possible.

Yet from the interviews we had, two things emerged. The first is that there is a reckoning with the fact of being a foreigner. For example, being a foreigner means that you are understood as someone who is intruding into a space you do not deserve to be in. As the sentiment normally expressed is that foreigners are not entitled to enjoy any benefits of the fruits of South Africa. Yet as one interviewee states, there is a need to recognize the contribution of other African countries to the freedom of South Africa.

I wanted to mention that there's a part of history in South Africa that is missing. You forgetting that during the apartheid era, they're forgetting that Mandela did not fight for freedom alone it was a collective effort, but they don't teach this in history. I've been to South African schools. I've grown I grew up in South Africa. I've gone to school. I've gone to I've read the history. They have never mentioned that many of these African countries donated to South Africa's freedom. Do you know that one of the highest donations came from Nigeria? (Nigerian Immigrant Youth, Johannesburg 2024)

The carving out of African foreigners from the history of South Africa not only excludes them but may also lead to them earning a status where they are seen as enemies. As one interviewee notes, there is a need to change the mindset that sees foreigners as enemies, if integration is going to stand a chance.

So I feel like the best thing to happen for this country is to clarify and change that mindset of like we're enemies. That's why I like to see Malema. He's very clear about it: Africans are brothers and sisters. This is our land. If we're to fight against anybody at all, it should be those of a different colour who came from overseas. (Nigerian Immigrant Youth, Johannesburg 2024)

The interviewee's statement may show the inadequacy of ubuntu and decoloniality. The first problem is that of being perceived as enemies in circumstances where one does not believe that they should be perceived as such. The perception is based on a mindset that the interviewee thinks is wrong. It is a mindset that clearly fails to appreciate that there is a relationship that exists between the one who declares enmity and the declared enemy. To fail to see certain people as your brothers and sisters while choosing to see them as enemies is a fundamental error that can only be attributed to a wrong mindset. It could also be that Africa has not been fully reclaimed by Africans and there is still a need to come to terms with the true extent of the dispossession. Part of the

misunderstanding may be based on the failure to integrate. Hence, one interviewee calls for it when they state:

For integration to happen its going to require a lot of joint consensus seeking engagements, so engagements with the main purpose of coming together, speaking to someone from Nigeria, or an Igbo person, and trying to understand him better, to know what it is what they go through, what goes through their mind, and then also that Igbo person trying to understand the South African. (Nigerian Youth Immigrant, Johannesburg 2024)

As the interviewee points out, there is a need for consensus in search of agreements. When the interviewee goes on to point out the different ethnic memberships of the people who are searching for understanding, the pertinent problem begins to emerge. The most important question will relate to how other people with different commitments and interests may be able to come to a consensual position. The answer, as suggested by the interviewee, seems to be that it should be based on understanding the other. Yet this could turn out to be the biggest challenge for theories such as ubuntu. Understanding the other is probably the hardest thing that human beings can be asked to do at any given time (Wierzbicka 2012).

If a Nigerian person can understand the South African, and if a South African can understand Nigerian, there will be no need for us to be divided. So it's all about that center point for us all find that common ground to say that you know that I am, South African, you are Nigerian, but we share these two, or these three things in common. (Nigerian Youth Immigrant, Johannesburg 2024)

What is insightful about this statement is recognition, by the interviewee, that in order for understanding to happen, there is a need for realization of what both foreigners and locals share in-common (Wierzbicka 2012). While the interviewee does not go on to elaborate on what those things in common could be. It is interesting to explain how a shared understanding could be coined. The first thing to observe is that while migrants are everywhere and in every sector of South Africa, the problems of integration are in vulnerable communities (see Ruzungunde and Zhou 2021).

Probably, what can be read from these targets and what the interviewee is alluding to is the shared precarity among South Africans, Zimbabweans and Nigerians. The fact that they have that risk for being targeted while trying to find refuge in poor communities should lead to a realization of how life is different for them as compared to other foreigners. For example, for many of our interviewees, the issue of language came up as important. The ability to learn and speak local languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, seTswana and seSotho was seen as important for processes of integration and building a sense of belonging. This may not be the case with affluent migrants, which could suggest that the struggle for immigrants is not uniform. This may necessitate the building of different forms of understanding. When migrants ask for a shared understanding, it could be that they are asking for locals to understand that they both share the same proximity to Africa's hardships.

A zone of hope and integration

In the course of our interviews, what became very clear was how the young immigrants found favour and hope within their communities of faith. What makes that hope for

integration possible is the fact that these communities are Christian, and therefore, follow the teachings of accepting and loving the other. Even in those circumstances where immigrants appear to represent the extreme other, and an inconvenience that is to be normally and ordinarily avoided, a word from the pulpit reminding the congregants of their responsibilities towards the migrant eases the migrant's plight. Elina Hankela, in her discussion of Zimbabwean refugees at the Methodist church in Johannesburg, describes this as the power of the refugee. She argues that anyone in the congregation who would condemn these refugees would be seen as going against the theological teachings of the church (Hankela 2012, 202–204).

The most important factor in the building of this trust and integration is the church leader (Hankela 2012, 125–133), either the priest or the pastor. They seem to have the ability to provide a reassuring space where migrants may feel they belong. One interviewee states it as follows:

You know what you feel. You feel like you know the pastor that you are trusting with his religion to lead you, you know that place is giving you the platform that you require, and you feel free. You don't have to hide who you are or the essence of who you are. So that is integration, very important in any space and all for it. (Zimbabwean Youth Immigrant, Johannesburg 2024)

This is supported by another interviewee who asserts that the church does not see nation or colour. It embraces all who are members. She states the matter as follows:

Yeah, the church is like, it's a mix. There are coloureds, there are South Africans, there are others from Congo, then there are others from Zimbabwe. So, you know, at church, there's no discrimination. You know, when you go maybe, like, outside right now, and then you meet some other people, and then you tell them you're a foreigner, like, there's this vibe that they give you. And then when you go to the church, everyone welcomes you. You're welcome. We are the same. There's no South African, there's no Zimbabwe, there's no white. We are all the same. So, yeah, it really helped. (Zimbabwean Youth Immigrant, Johannesburg 2024)

Unity, integration, and belonging are found within the religious space but not in the rest of society. Our interviews expressed wide-ranging feelings of not being accepted either in their schools or in the wider community. Although some of the interviewees, particularly the younger ones, were not aware of any discrimination or lack of integration, this could have been due to their age or the easy-going nature of children. The presence of unity and integration within the church space may bring us to think differently about what the fundamental basis of integration in African societies is, especially considering what Pasura (2026) has described as youths on the move. Scholars, particularly outside the religious and theological space, are not normally given to considering what role religion plays in integration. In particular, advocates of traditional versions of social cohesion do not see Christianity as a possible mode of integration. With decolonialists, Christianity can become a target of criticism for its association with the colonizing mission as well as the dumbing down of African values. The unsuitability for Christianity as capable of integrating different people, including different Africans, may be seen by such thinkers as due to its lack of rootedness in African identity.

The multiplicity of existence in today's Africa and beyond represents a myriad of values that need careful enumeration to capture what they truly represent (Kazira and Pasura 2026). As one of the interviewees states:

Yeah, I think with me, it was always a matter of trying to not necessarily blend in, but to strike a balance. Because, for example, you're coming from two totally different cultures. One is the Igbo culture from my dad, one is the Xhosa culture from my mom. So you can't really say you are one without accepting or acknowledging the other, because there are always two holes to a half. (Nigerian-South African Youth, Johannesburg 2024)

The interviewee's attitude demonstrates how the world of some of the youths in migrant communities have to and succeed in dealing with a heritage of different cultures. While it can be said that such a phenomenon is not new to humanity, what is important to note is that there is an increasing number of youths who are products of different heritages. They may have a mixed parentage, but also end up growing up in a place that is not culturally identical with any of their parents' cultures (Dusi 2015). They might have to make a home out of the place they are in, which could be a temporary experience before they move to a totally different place, thus becoming what are known as "third culture kids". Laia Colomer defines them as "a particular type of migrant, defined by high international mobility during childhood and a lack of attachment to any of the particular cultures and national discourses of the countries in which they have grown up" (2017, 914). These youths have no choice in this movement, Colomer argues, but find themselves in these situations because of their parents' decisions and responses to the job market. Yet such movement creates new networks of associating with different people as well as enabling youths to work out their identity. This is exemplified in the following two quotes from two different youths who were interviewed.

By virtue of landing on Xhosa and an Igbo person into one person, not trying to separate myself so I think that's been the biggest impact for me, just trying to find that balance, and, you know, trying to understand myself more by understanding that I can't choose to be Igbo and not Xhosa I'll choose to because I am not Igbo, because either way, my mom and dad had to exist in order for me to become not my mom alone or my dad alone. Yeah, so I can't choose one me and leave the other. I need to now put both of them together to be one person, to make a whole.

I'm going to also learn all of this and try and be able to find common ground between the two, so that when I do go to Nigeria, I'm able to say that, okay, this is what we do in Nigeria when I come back to South Africa and this is what we do in South Africa. But all in all, coming back to the middle to say that all of this contributes to the person that you see as Uche, to say that this is what Uche believes in. This is his spirituality. (Nigerian-South African Youth, Johannesburg 2024)

The clear challenge presented here is twofold. First, it is the working of one's identity and second, it is the challenge of becoming acquainted with the two worlds that constitute that identity. There is a clear rejection of choosing between these worlds, which Colomer describes as "de-territorialization of culture" which transcends national boundaries (ibid., 914–915). What is favoured is an understanding of each world on its own, followed by the reconciliation of both in the person of the interviewee. Whether there are other people who share that same position or not, it appears as if this is something that the individual has to struggle with on their own. They have to come to highly personal terms with what it means to go to Nigeria, as stated above, and be Nigerian while returning to South Africa to be South African again. Any failure to negotiate these roles may be devastating, yet where it is successful, it is positive as it brings a different mix of people together as one youth demonstrates:

When the idea came to start the Igbo Union Youth wing, one of the things that was used as a way of getting me to the position as President was to say that he's not fully Igbo. I know he's not fully Igbo. We understand him. He has learned the language in every single way, but not only in learning the language and the culture. You need to look at the fact that he was born in South Africa to a South African mom, all his education, all his life, every single day about him was in South Africa, and yet he took the time to learn about being Igbo and learn his language and learn his culture. So now, when the other youth see me, people who are also like me, maybe parents from South Africa, from Nigeria or even the ones who are just born here in South Africa, to both Nigerian parents, they can look at me and think, okay, he's someone we can learn from, because he has given himself the time to learn about his Igbo culture as well as his Xhosa culture. So this now makes it easier for us to say we have a role model that we can look up to. (Nigerian-South African Youth, Johannesburg 2024)

These developments and realities for transnational youth who are mobile and products of migration are not a negligible part of the population. Thinking about their experiences, developing concepts that fit their reality, and making sense of their world can only lead to a much more nuanced reading of Africa. Value systems and the ontologies and epistemologies that inform them are not going to be monolithic, but hybrid (Boland 2020). In their hybridity, these youths find their identity in a multiplicity of sites, and religious belonging is one of those important sites.

Conclusion

While there exist several theoretical explorations of what African experiences are, there are reasons to believe that certain theories do better in some domains than others. Ubuntu and decoloniality have been used to explain the social and political conditions that may have a bearing on issues of borders as they relate to inclusion and exclusion. When it comes to migration, these theories understate what the daily realities of migrant youths could be, with respect to integration. In this instance, precarity may be a more comprehensive tool of understanding the causes and experiences of migration as articulated by Nigerian and Zimbabwean young migrants we interviewed in Johannesburg. Yet in the face of precarity, what also emerges is how young people try to make sense of their own lives through their spirituality from their religious experiences. In attempting to deal with their daily challenges of being both migrant and African, they seek to integrate themselves into communities that are accepting of their identities.

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