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‘A question of faith’: an explorative pilot study on the relationship between West African religion, migration and human trafficking

Luning, N.; Dijk, R.A. van; Kate, L. ten

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Noortje Luning

In collaboration with
Rijk van Dijk and Laurens ten Kate

Executive project leader:
Sabine Leermakers

September 2021

*Centre against Child and Human Trafficking (CKM)
African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL)
University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht (UvH)*

With the support of Salvation Army Amsterdam

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Design: Renske de Boer

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PREFACE

The report 'A Question of Faith' is the result of a collaborative pilot research project initiated and facilitated by the Centre against Human Trafficking (CKM) in Capelle aan den IJssel, in collaboration with the African Studies Centre of the University of Leiden (ASCL) and the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht (UvH). Between May 2019 and September 2020, the project was carried out by researcher Noortje Luning, who is also the principal author of this report. The academic project supervision was taken care of by Rijk van Dijk (ASCL) and Laurens ten Kate (UvH), both of whom contributed to writing the report. The executive project leader was Sabine Leermakers of CKM. The researcher, supervisors and CKM bear collective responsibility for 'A Question of Faith'.¹

The project explored the role of religion in the life of migrants who may have been in contact with human trafficking. The research focused on migrants between West Africa and the Netherlands. Why religion? This is because the world of religious life, meaning, practice and ritual are central to the way the migrants have experienced life and plays a role in the history of their migration. To them, the risky journey and the experience of migration is "a question of faith".² This project is an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of why and how this is so. After a brief study of relevant literature, the researcher developed and drew on a network of contacts and respondents for the ethnographic fieldwork. From March 2020 the empirical work was hampered considerably due to the crisis caused by Covid-19. Despite the difficulties in meeting the respondents, this report on the weekly encounters and conversations can be seen as an explorative, interim, yet satisfying, result. 'A Question of Faith' is a pilot study, potentially laying the foundations for follow-up academic research to be designed and initiated in 2021. Moreover, on the basis of its provisional conclusions and recommendations, a training course will be developed by CKM for professional practitioners working with migrants who may have been potential victims of human trafficking and other concerned professionals. Since the research was carried out independently from CKM in terms of its content, views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of CKM.

The research presented in this report has a history dating back to 2015, when the report *De religieuze lacune* (The Religious Lacuna), written by Rijk van Dijk and Laurens ten Kate, was published by the Fairwork Association in Amsterdam that operates in close cooperation with CKM.

1 Although the report has been written by one researcher as author, the 'we'-form is often used to stress the engagement of the researcher as part of a broader team.

2 See below, 4.3.

It presented the first results of research carried out by two Master students at the University of Humanistic Studies, Fenna Bergmans and Jette van Ravesteyn. *De religieuze lacune* addressed the difficulties that professional caregivers have in developing a level of cultural sensitivity with regard to the impact of religion in the life of a migrant.³ As a next step, Noortje Luning's research project was initiated, shifting the focus from the caregivers toward the migrants themselves. When the project was finished in the Fall of 2020, a first version of this report was written which was reworked and shortened to the present version for a broader readership. Feedback and support by Frank Noteboom (CKM) and by Annemarie Heeringa of the Salvation Army Amsterdam has been very helpful; the team is grateful for their intensive work. The Salvation Army Amsterdam published a report in 2017 which has been valuable for our research: *Finding a Way Out – A Qualitative Research on the Patterns after Exploitation in the Netherlands amongst Nigerian and Ghanaian Victims of Human Trafficking*. We thank Jacqueline Goldin for her editing work. Also, we are grateful to the foundations who have supported this project financially.

Noortje Luning graduated in Theology and Religious Studies on the study of Derrida and radical atheism. She has since been working on various anthropological research projects.

Rijk van Dijk is Professor of Religion in Contemporary Africa and its Diaspora at the African Studies Centre (Leiden University).

Laurens ten Kate is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies and endowed Professor of Liberal Religion and Humanism, both at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht.

Sabine Leermakers is senior policy officer at the Centre against Child and Human Trafficking (CKM) in Capelle aan den IJssel.

3 See for a recent presentation and data analysis of this earlier research Ten Kate et al., 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING THE PROBLEM

1.1 The functional and hermeneutical dimension of religion

The present report is the result of twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Netherlands with West African migrants who may have been potential victims of human trafficking.⁴ Insight is offered into the religious 'landscape' West African migrants find themselves in, which is comprised of multiple religious traditions, complex networks and interpersonal relationships. Overall, the purpose of this report is to contribute to the enhancement of a cultural sensitivity within social support & care organizations in The Netherlands in view of their clients' religious understandings and personal convictions and concerns. The content of this report may also be helpful for other organizations concerned, such as investigative bodies or legal courts. Enhancing this cultural sensitivity is, this report argues, made possible through discussing more precisely the religious aspects that come to the fore as these are often a major source of confusion; both between social care workers and their West African clients, as well as vice versa. By cultural sensitivity we imply the creation of a larger space for mutual dialogue, improved communication as well as an empathetic sharing of points of view, concerns and commitments. Though we do not use a strict definition of religion, it is important to emphasize that the significance of religion can be multi-dimensional. For the purposes of this research, we want to highlight two dimensions that will recur throughout the report through which the migrants experience and engage with religion in their daily lives. We frame them as follows:

1. the functional dimension is associated with instrumental questions of support, success, authority and community.
2. the hermeneutical dimension: how to make sense of the world and give meaning to one's position in it. In this instance we include existential modes and interpretation such as fear and hope.⁵

4 See section 2.1 for a brief discussion on the complex issue of defining and distinguishing migration as compared to human trafficking, which is not the scope and focus of this research.

5 We generally base this distinction on the debates on the definitions of religion developed in the last half century by Clifford Geertz and Melford Spiro, namely the 'substantive' and the 'functional' definition. See for an overview and nuanced discussion Berger, 1974.

More specifically, we refer to current accounts of religion in philosophical research and in religious studies. See for the former e.g. Taylor, 2007, in which the author conceptualizes modern religion as a complex interplay of immanent religion and transcendent religion, also coined by Taylor as 'secularity 3' (see in particular p. 20). See for the latter e.g. Smart, 1996, 1998, who distinguishes between several

As will become clear in the presentation of the fieldwork, these two dimensions are very much interlinked. Authority, for example, is socially defined but it is also based on (and contested through) meaning and interpretation of specific experiences. The functional dimension is vital for migrants to find practical ways to travel and survive – just as the dimension of hermeneutics offers ways of understanding and expressing what it is to be a migrant. These two dimensions are crucial in approaching the religious field this report has been engaged with.

1.2 Religion, migration and human trafficking in current scholarship

1.2.1 Religion as imported category

Before European colonization, the notion of 'religion' was absent in West Africa (Meyer, 2020). The European influence on the continent did not only introduce a new religion (Christianity), but it also brought with it a specific understanding of what religion is or should be. This understanding was heavily determined by Enlightenment ideas in which knowledge, belief and forms of community that resemble the organizational structures of a church are considered to be essential to religion in general. The academic comparative study of religion approached African religious notions and practices was based on these ideas, that were taken to be universal characteristics of religion. Building on these ideas, the first missionaries and social scientists who studied African religion considered the kind of religion found on the African continent to be at an 'early stage' in the development of religion and society. According to this thesis of religious progression, the lower stages of religion would be characterized as being driven by 'magical thinking', whereas the higher stages would be characterized by increased rationality, not coincidentally exemplified by the kind of religion they themselves adhered to. This thesis is also linked to the idea that societies become less and less 'religious' as they become more modern. It is this secularization thesis which, though not accepted in academia as widely now as before, still lingers on in ideas about Africans being 'highly religious' or 'still enchanted' – and therefore, considered to be not as 'far' on the ladder of modernization as their more secular European counterparts (Meyer, 2020).

Roothaan (2011) furthermore describes how ideas about spirit and the spiritual have played an

'dimensions' of religion, some of which are hermeneutical – such as narrativity, doctrine, experience – while others are functional – including rituality, materiality, and socio-political functions of religion.



important part in Western ideas on religion, science and reality. She sketches how Enlightenment ideas on science have resulted in the decline of the 'the spiritual' as a legitimate dimension of reality and religion. Science did not only become the primary explainer of reality, but it also came to define the limits of what we allow ourselves to experience as real. Religious and spiritual experience turned out difficult to define as 'true' through scientific method. As a consequence, both negative and positive spiritual experiences have been labeled as deviant psychological conditions. Though they may be able to offer comfort and consolation, ultimately they are characterized as unreal (Roothaan, 2011, p. 170).

Already in this concise form it becomes clear that exploring the spiritual notions in religious expression provides a useful tool to understand the diversity of African religion while also correcting existing ideas about religion that are informed by universalistic Enlightenment (pre-) conceptions. These insights put pressure on professionals in the Netherlands who are working with these migrants to critically relate to their own (normative) ideas about religion, and to be aware of not taking one's own ideas about religion and spirituality as a benchmark when dealing with West African migrants. Also when professionals do try to find answers to the religious and spiritual needs of the migrants they encounter, they run the risk of not being fully aware of the meaning and implications of the course of actions taken, such as referring to a pastor or to possibly helpful rituals.

1.2.2 Pluralism of religion in West African migration processes and diaspora

Obadare & Adebawji (2010) show that a diverse repertoire of religious rituals is linked to the (preparation of a) migratory project. They argue that "the turn to religion and religious rites by would-be migrants is a rational act necessitated by the uncertainties built in the particular process of getting entry visas into Western countries and with emigration from the country as a whole" (Obadare & Adebawji, 2010, p. 36). This is in line with Guillemaut (2008) who states that certain religious practices can serve as an instrument for insurance and protection. Furthermore, Obadare & Adebawji claim that religious rituals may alleviate the humiliation and contingency that is connected with migration processes. Other authors also highlight the importance of using spiritual powers for successful migration (Adogame 2013, p. 20; Guillemaut, 2008). Also, it is worth stating that most migrants do not regard themselves as migrating towards a specific country, but rather as people "moving in the global labor market" (Adogame, 2013, p. 55).

In order to understand religion and migration in their complexity, it is necessary to explore the relation between the different traditions that constitute the religious landscape of West African migrants. Guillemaut (2008) already notes that West African migrant sex workers display a certain 'syncretism' that is fit to their situation. Different religious traditions matter, ranging from West African historical traditions often associated with ritual practices that take place at shrines

and are conducted by traditional healers and mediums, to practices and traditions in which creative convergences have been made with religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, and Christian traditions that have emerged after the introduction of missionary Christianity. These last two have established transnational congregations from Africa into Europe, especially Pentecostalism, a strand of Christianity that can be characterized by an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and personal spiritual experience.⁶ Apart from these 'satellite' congregations, also many independent African congregations have been founded in the African diaspora.

In the research done by Van de Kamp (2011), De Witte (2010), Gemmeke (2013) and Atekmangoh (2017) it becomes clear how these various religious and spiritual practices and ideas do not only 'travel along' with migrants, but also play an active part in their migration processes. Atekmangoh (2017), for example, demonstrates how the social and economic relation between family in Africa and in the diaspora is shaped and what strategies migrants use to deal with the spiritual pressure that is being put on them to remit money. De Witte (2010) pays attention to the struggle for authority going on between certain strands of neo-traditional religion and Christianity. Van de Kamp (2011) argues that Pentecostalism is not only a way of 'coping' with the challenges of migration but is in fact an active driver in the process of globalization where transnationalism and 'pioneering' are often promoted as key values in Pentecostal communities. The rise of Pentecostal migrant communities has attracted a great deal of academic attention.

Transition to (Pentecostal) Christianity is often associated with not only a personal conversion to a particular faith, but also with a 'conversion to modernity' (see Van der Veer, 1996). Becoming a Pentecostal 'born again' also entails a modern lifestyle and its accompanying gender patterns. Pentecostalism subverts male dominance in ways that turn out advantageous to women, as traditional family values limit older forms of male dominance which are family unfriendly. This phenomenon has previously been called the Pentecostal gender paradox (Martin, 2001), since though Pentecostalism upholds patriarchal values, its focus on 'family values' provides women with means of improving their own position. Literature has shown that these religious communities often play a central and multi-faceted role in the lives of migrants (see for example the work of Ter Haar (1998), Van Dijk (2002a, 2002b), Knibbe (2018), Bartelink & Knibbe, (2019), Van Dijk & Ten Kate (2015). Van der Meulen (2008) argues that migrant African church communities and their leaders encounter difficulties in joining the public debate on political and social matters. Though Pentecostalism may be the most visible religious tradition that West-African migrants belong to, it is by no means the only tradition to be attentive to. See for

6 For our understanding of Pentecostalism we are heavily indebted to the work of Adogame (2013). Further suggested reading: Ter Haar (1998), Gifford (2004), Asamoah-Gyadu (2004, 2014) and Marshall (2009).

example research on West African traditional healers and mediums (Gemmeke, 2013) and the role of traditional rituals in migration and trafficking (Guillemaut, 2008).

1.2.3 West African historical traditional religions

The 'religion' that European colonizers and missionaries identified in West Africa, consisted of a great diversity of traditions that centered around the relation with the spiritual world, including ancestral spirits (see among others Rosenthal, 1998). Traditional mediums have played an important role in mediating between an unseen world and the local community and continue to do so. Matters of concern include health and healing, fortune and wealth, spiritual protection and fertility. As we shall see, these topics are also of vital importance in other traditions such as Pentecostal Christianity.

As there is no central authority underpinning these traditions, they have the ability of creative change in response to how interests, norms and values evolve in a given society. Though academically classified under the umbrella term 'African Traditional Religions', no West African participant in this research⁷ referred to these traditions as a form of religion. Representatives of these traditions such as Vodun priests preferred to speak about Vodun as having to do with spiritual power or harmony with nature and drew attention to the absence of any holy book or central authority. Other participants mainly referred more generally to 'tradition'. We will come back to this question in chapter 4. Though known under various names in different parts of Africa, 'Vodun' is a familiar term for this West African tradition. We use the terms 'Vodun', 'African Traditional Religions (ATR)' or 'tradition' when referring to this tradition, while we acknowledge that the word 'voodoo' became used as common discourse between police and migrant sex workers in the context of human trafficking since the late nineties (Van Dijk et al., 1999).

Most research about religion and human trafficking came to focus on the instrumental role of 'voodoo' in trafficking processes without taking into account the political and social context of this designation. Some authors focus on the kind and degree of coercion that comes with these rituals and their function in a criminal perspective (Baarda, 2015; Van der Watt & Kouger, 2017). Other authors aim to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon by placing it in a broader cultural context (Van Dijk et al., 1999; Olufade, 2018; Diagboya, 2019; Ikeora, 2016). In this literature, the practice of taking oaths before a migration project is considered as forming part of a socially accepted religious-legal⁸ tradition. In this practice, prospective migrants

7 We will refer to the respondents participating in the ethnographic research as either 'respondent' or 'participant'.

8 In West Africa, the spiritual and the legal are intertwined in the practice of shrines, for example when civilians intend to make an agreement about a financial deal or family affairs. See also Rosenthal, 1998.

vow to pay back a certain amount of money to the agent who organizes their travels to Europe. However, not many authors pay enough attention to the socially constructed nature of the term 'voodoo'. As mentioned above, Guillemaut (2008) describes the flexibility with which African migrant sex workers deal with this and other forms of religion.

1.2.4 Three features of West African spirituality

The literature explored and presented so far offers us three important features of West African spirituality that will guide us in the following ethnographic research (Meyer 2020). They come to the fore in both the hermeneutical and the functional dimension of religion among West African migrants in the Netherlands.

1. Firstly, we observe a certain groundedness in the way West African migrants relate to the spiritual: building up a life, living in health and prosperity, taking care of family and friends – these are all themes that have a central place in religious services and rituals. Meyer (2020) describes a "grounded, embedded and to some extent instrumental religiosity that is not separate from what we now call economy, but inflected with it, in that spirits themselves are resources that feature in the allocation of other resources". This does not only refer to the unseen world of spirits, but also to its material occurrences, for example when a church flyer for a missionary event is imbued with spiritual force through a prayer session.
2. The second feature that appears to be crucial is openness toward the foreign. Openness to the foreign is part of African religion. African shrines often include religious objects from various traditions, including Hindu and Christian imagery. "In my understanding religion in Africa is about engaging otherness – spirits from the 'North', e.g., the Christian God, or the traditional African water spirit Mamiwata – and searching for new technologies⁹ to access such powers" (Meyer, 2020). This may differ from Western understandings of religion, in which it is assumed religious traditions or denominations are sharply delineated from one another.
3. Thirdly, Meyer (2020) points to the relationality and connectivity that is at the heart of African religion and spirituality. It is about social entanglement with each other, with other spirits, and with relatives that have passed. This can also result in the need to defend oneself from these ties, for example by being delivered from a 'familiar spirit' as we will read in the fieldwork experiences.

9 'Technologies' in this context refers to any method or tool that is used to reach a goal. Examples include praying, consulting an oracle, horoscopes or reading tarot cards.

1.3 Aim of the research

We aim to enhance cultural sensitivity for the interaction between the hermeneutical and the functional dimension of religion (see section 1.1) amongst migrants by:

1. addressing and exploring how (knowledge of) religion and religious practices are situated in the interaction of migrants with social environments in the Netherlands and with the social support organizations that are embedded in these environments;
2. developing insight into the complex plurality of the religious landscape in which West African migrants participate, and unpacking the linkage of religion and migration;
3. generating a better understanding of the role of religion in the lives of West African migrants who may have been potential victims of trafficking, so as to better inform organizations working against human trafficking.

1.4 Central question

Knowledge and cultural sensitivity regarding religion often form a challenge to institutions in the Netherlands that face the complex and urgent task to host, counsel and offer care to West African migrants who may have been potential victims of trafficking – whether these are political, legal or aid institutions. Religion is often treated as being an instrument used in the process of trafficking (for instance through ritual migration pacts and ‘voodoo’ pacts), or religion is seen to be a driver that brings communities together and offers support for migrants who may have been potential victims of trafficking. We intend to enhance the cultural sensitivity of the institutions by approaching the religious reality of these migrants beyond this positive-negative binary.

Following from the problem statement above, our central question is:

How does religion relate to the complex reality of West African migrants?

1.5 Structure and design of this report

After presenting the research location and discussing methodological matters in the next chapter (2), the core of this report presents fieldwork experiences and an analysis of the fieldwork. It starts with an anthropological ‘vignette’ (3). This vignette is about a young Nigerian man called Wisdom¹⁰, whose story contextualizes the lived reality of West African migrants and their religious world of experiences and presents us with some key themes for analysis.

¹⁰ For reasons of privacy, a fictional name has been chosen.

In the next chapter (4), ‘Spirit’, the actual ethnographic data are worked out and analyzed. In this chapter, we begin most sections with experiences from the fieldwork. These experiences, as well as the vignette in chapter 3, are presented in the words and from the perspective of the researcher so as to emphasize the subjective aspect of ethnographic fieldwork where primary data has been collected based on relations of trust. These fieldwork experiences are included to illustrate and render the analysis more lively, but are not exhaustive: not all fieldwork experiences can be represented in the analysis this report offers.

The report will finish with our conclusions and recommendations (5).

We will use the following color-codes to indicate the source of the material presented;

orange is used for personal fieldwork experiences with the core group of respondents (as designated in section 2.1),

blue is used for interaction with religious leaders,

We introduce, interpret or contextualize our findings in **grey**.

2. RESEARCH POPULATION AND METHODS

2.1 Migrants and victims of human trafficking

The focus population for this study consisted of West African migrants who may have been potential victims of human trafficking from West-Africa who were in the Netherlands at the time of research. An *inclusive* approach was opted for in this research, which means respondents were approached without classifying them as either victims of trafficking or migrants.

There are various difficulties in determining how, where, to what extent and in what forms West African trafficking is taking place in The Netherlands (see De Jong, 2015; National Rapporteur, 2020; CKM/Noteboom, 2017; WODC, 2020). Also, the term 'victim of trafficking' brings in conceptual, disciplinary and methodological challenges as it is part of complex power dynamics both at the interstate and personal level (see for example Mai, 2016 and Oluwatoyin & Akinyoade, 2015). In this report, we cannot go deeply into these challenges. Instead of focusing on the history of trafficking per se and the possible status of migrants as victims of trafficking, we aimed to arrive at a more integral understanding of the lives of the participants, of the way they understand themselves and especially the role religion and spirituality play in their lives. For these reasons, we have decided to designate our respondents as migrants in general, sometimes adding the specification 'who may have been potential victims of trafficking'.

2.2 The research location and its religious landscape

Christianity and Vodun are the main traditions represented in this research. Though Islam is an important religion in West Africa, we noted that most West Africans contacted in this research identified as Christian.

The participants in this research show a variety of church affiliations: some frequented 'white churches' (referring to Dutch churches), some went to Catholic churches, others went to what are academically called 'spirit-healing churches'¹¹ designated as a 'white garment church' or 'spiritual church' by the participants themselves. However, without doubt the most prominent strand of Christianity among the respondents is Pentecostalism. Even if participants did not frequent a Pentecostal local church community, they would attend occasional special events hosted by Pentecostal churches or movements. The influence and style of worshipping of Pentecostalism can also be observed in other Christian denominations. Pentecostal churches

11 These churches emerging in the first half of the 20th century combined Christianity with elements from West African traditions. See for example Gifford (2004).

are known for their emphasis on the (Holy) Spirit and its gifts such as speaking in tongues. Despite many similarities, there is variation between all these different churches and amongst Pentecostal churches as well. Some West African diaspora church communities are part of a larger international church and thus are included in a particular organizational structure and hierarchy. Other church communities are independent, led by one or a few religious leaders. Though some of these leaders may have had formal religious education, this is not a prerogative. Some religious leaders are full-time pastors, others have other formal education qualifications and/or another career. The religious leaders of Pentecostal churches use various titles or designations, including but not limited to 'pastor,' 'prophet' and 'bishop'. Though the pastors of a church community are the most prominent, a team of community members usually embark on other tasks within the community. Furthermore, not all churches emphasize the spirit world equally. Some include themes like 'spiritual warfare' in their mission and vision statements, but others are much less vocal on the issue.

Most participants indicated that Vodun and its power is to be found in Africa itself where shrines are located. Though some Vodun specialists can be found in the Netherlands, the general belief was that certain rituals could only be carried out within the West African context.¹² This does not preclude the use of more low-key rituals, which were, however, no longer designated as being actual Vodun.

Respondents also pointed at practices in which knowledge and rituals from Vodun traditions were subverted and used for what they perceived as the 'wrong' purposes. These were referred to as 'juju', 'black magic', and 'voodoo'. These practices, that were thought to be powerful nonetheless, were often associated with money, criminal or immoral practices as well as the (ab)use of political power. However, as we shall see in chapter 4, the concern about religious power being used for the wrong purposes is not reserved for this particular religious tradition, as participants also voiced their mistrust regarding pastors and other religious specialists.

12 In general, the continent of Africa was associated with a stronger spiritual power than Europe. Another reason given for the absence of ritual shrines was the perceived unlawfulness of sacrificing livestock in rituals.

2.3 Finding the respondents

In order to operationalize the complex power dynamics migrants who may have been potential victims of trafficking find themselves in, various methods were used to identify potential respondents. The research also purposively identified a number of migrants who were at various stages of their migration trajectory. In order to reach respondents who were at work in the sex sector, social support organizations in Amsterdam, Den Haag and Rotterdam were contacted. Those organizations that responded, indicated they did not see many West Africans working as sex workers anymore. Some of the B8-shelters that were contacted in the same cities considered the presence of a researcher too intrusive for their vulnerable clients or indicated there were already too many research projects going on. Other B8-shelters indicated there had been only a few West Africans residents in their shelters over the past couple of years.¹³ In addition, an attempt was made to make contact with undocumented migrants through organizations providing support to this specific group by asking their professionals to hand out contact sheets. These sheets provided the migrants with information about the research project and a request to contact the researcher. This method proved unsuccessful in contacting respondents.

Eventually, two support organizations were willing to bring the researcher in contact with respondents. At ORG1, an organization that provides various forms of support to victims of trafficking, gave the researcher the opportunity to meet a group of nine West African women. Helpful in building this contact was also engaging in a number of volunteer activities such as offering computer literacy courses and carrying out general coordination tasks. It was communicated to the participants that they were under no obligation to participate in the research and that they could follow the computer literacy courses without participating in the research. The group consisted mostly of Nigerians who were not in possession of a legal permit to stay in the Netherlands, except for two of them who were legal residents. The others had been denied legal residency in the past but were looking for ways to obtain a permit to stay. Many of the participants, whose age ranges from early twenties to late fifties, had been in the Netherlands for several years. Some of the participants had been part of the ORG1 group for a couple of years already, others had joined around the time of this research.

The second organization willing to bring the researcher in contact with respondents was an Evangelical Christian organization, referred to in this report as ORG2. A group of volunteers organized a monthly afternoon of activities to support victims of trafficking. This afternoon

¹³ Some literature points at the reasons why this may be so, see for example Noteboom/CKM 2017, Leermakers/CKM 2017, WODC 2020, National Rapporteur 2020.

was frequented mostly by residents of a nearby B8-shelter and former residents of this shelter who were now going through the humanitarian asylum procedure – usually referred to as ‘the camp’.¹⁴ During these afternoons, the researcher met mostly Ugandan and some Nigerian women. The organization is overtly Christian, although the organization does emphasize that everyone is welcome to join regardless of their religious conviction.

Apart from working with these organizations and the respondents contacted there, the researcher was able to build a relationship with a Tanzanian woman who has gone through the B8 procedure (and perhaps also asylum procedures) and is now a legal resident of the Netherlands as well as with a Sierra Leonian woman who, although she had gone through the B8 procedure and asylum procedures had not been granted legal status. The researcher also met with a young Nigerian man called Wisdom during a church service after which they stayed in touch.

A core group of eighteen key-respondents was thus made up of these women and man. In addition, the researcher has also been in touch with twelve religious leaders from different denominations, as well as seventeen professionals dealing with human trafficking and migration.

2.4 Literature review; qualitative ethnographic research techniques

2.4.1 Review

The first three months of the project a general literature review on religion, migration and human trafficking has been undertaken by the researcher. Three important points of focus were (1) academic research on the West African community in the Netherlands (either in published form or through conversations with researchers in this field), (2) specific literature providing data about victims of human trafficking in The Netherlands, starting from reports published by the Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings, CKM, Comensha and Fier (among others), and (3) on cultural anthropological sources, as is reflected above in our Introduction (1. 2). From there onward a snowball technique was adopted.

¹⁴ Meant to refer to the camps in which the refugees reside during their asylum procedure.

2.4.2 Qualitative ethnographic research

One of the participants shared her experience of having to go through interviews with the IND (Immigration and Naturalization Service): “where I come from we don’t do it that way. We don’t sit down and ‘get some information’ from you.” The fact that so much is at stake in these interviews was very distressing to her: “my heart was racing so much I couldn’t even see it, it was so far away. I didn’t know where to find my heart!”

Migrants who may have been potential victims of trafficking are often subjected to various ‘interviews’ at several stages in their migration process, such as interviews with the authorities on immigration, the police, and through various legal procedures as well as research projects in which they participate. (see the fieldwork experience at the start of this section). The researcher was thus careful to avoid reproducing ‘another’ interview situation for the respondents, as migration histories are often fraught with secrecy and fear. The researcher chose to focus on building relationships of trust instead. She opted for a research method aimed at developing relations of mutual trust and confidence over an extended period of time, since the research focused on sensitive topics such as human trafficking, migration, migrant sex work and religion. It was important to reach an emic understanding of the respondents’ perspectives. Formal interviews were conducted with a few respondents but in most cases, conversations were much more informal. In view of the qualitative research techniques of participant observation and personal contact, the researcher frequently joined some of the participants during their religious services. This was not only an important part of building rapport, but it was also a way of putting the perspective of the participants at the centre as much as possible by experiencing the same religious events as they did.

Fieldwork was conducted between September 2019 and September 2020, during which time the researcher held semi-structured interviews with religious leaders and aid workers and participated in religious and cultural events. The engagement with respondents through ORG1 started in January 2020. From March to June 2020, face-to-face contact with participants was interrupted because of Covid-19. Phone and WhatsApp were used to stay in touch.

The researcher kept fieldwork notes of all activities and contacts. Instead of recording conversations, notes were taken during and immediately after conversations and were elaborated on as soon as possible on a password-protected device and document. These notes were used for analysis, and some of them can be found at the start of the sections that will follow. Direct quotations are only used when the researcher was able to collect sufficient detail during the interview.

In view of adhering to the research ethics of informed consent, their consent in cooperating with the research was explicitly sought and established once the participants were extensively informed about the aim of the research, that they were under no obligation to collaborate with the researcher, could opt out at any time, and that their input would be treated anonymously. Names that appear in this report do not correspond to the real names of the respondents. In some cases, no pseudonym is provided in order to reduce identifiability.

3. VIGNETTE: WISDOM

In this key text, the researcher introduces Wisdom: a young Nigerian man who travelled to Europe. Though he does not identify himself as a victim of trafficking, his story is very relevant to us as it demonstrates how religion and migration are interlinked and which key-terms we can decipher heuristically for developing an analysis of that interlinkage. The report will come back to this story in the next chapters, as it contextualizes the connection between religion and human trafficking.

I met Wisdom in a festive and busy Sunday morning service in a Nigerian church in The Hague. That morning, the pastor had preached about the importance of going to church, even when things are going well, and you don't feel you need it so much. The pastor emphasized: even when you have papers, a job and you're happily married, you still need the word of God to nourish yourself and to resist attacks from the devil. The devil, Satan, knows you: if money makes you weak for his temptations, he will give you richness.

I had been sitting next to Wisdom until he was called to the front of the church to give a testimony. With the pastor next to him, he told the community how he had travelled from Nigeria to here, through Libya and Italy. He had experienced hardships and the devil had attacked him often, but God saved him and now he is here in this church, saved. This was only the second time he visited the church: one week earlier he decided to give this testimony. After Wisdom's story, the pastor told the community how people are traded in Libya, how sometimes their organs are taken out, and how women are raped and do not know their babies' fathers. He asked the community to raise their hands to Wisdom and pray for this new member of the community. Impressed and touched by what I had witnessed, I raised up my hands to him dedicatedly. I had heard about these stories often, but never met a person who had risked so much just to be in a country like the one in which I grew up without really anything to worry about.

After Wisdom returned to his seat next to me, I asked him where he was staying. He pointed to someone sitting a few meters away from us. He said he had been in this city for a week now and had spent half a year in the Netherlands. I offered to show the city to him, which he accepted so we exchanged numbers. In the following months, we met a couple of times and kept in touch through WhatsApp.

Wisdom decided to leave Nigeria a few years ago. It was dangerous to live there, since the police cannot be trusted and the 'courts' (armed groups, sometimes called fraternities or secret societies) are inescapable: they want you to join their fights, and if you decline, they will not hesitate to attack or even kill your family. Many of Wisdom's friends joined courts, but he wanted a better life. Like many West Africans, his view on Nigerians wasn't very positive. According to him, they have a 'dirty heart' and the violence in Nigeria is inescapable – it's something spiritual, he said.

When a cousin in Libya told him about possibilities to work in Libya, he decided to go. I asked him whether he closed a traveling agreement (for example in a shrine or in church), but Wisdom said he had travelled by himself and did not need any such agreements. Traveling through the desert to Libya, he and his travel companions were attacked three times by armed groups that are paid by the government. When he arrived in Libya, war had broken out. Wisdom had trouble explaining what the camps in Libya were like. "You wouldn't understand it." The beatings, all the dead bodies... Relatives of the people residing in the camp were extorted.¹⁵ Wisdom was lucky enough that his family could pay the camp's extorters on his behalf. At some point, Wisdom was about to be sold – I asked if I had heard correctly what Wisdom had just said. Yes, he did say sold, and Wisdom continued his story. Wisdom negotiated that instead of being sold, he could also work. Wisdom's offer was accepted and after working there for one month, Wisdom escaped. Subsequently he worked for another man, who after some time 'pushed' him, meaning he put Wisdom on a boat on the Mediterranean Sea. The passage was hard. Everyone in the boat feared for their lives and were praying all the time. Wisdom mentioned one particularly 'strong man' whose praying may have had an influence on their rescue, when being picked up from the sea.

After spending two years in Italy, Wisdom travelled to the Netherlands where, he knew, not speaking the language wouldn't be a problem as most people speak English easily. He lived in 'the camp' for half a year, until he got a negative reply on his asylum application. His lawyer told him that if he wanted to stay in Europe he could try again

¹⁵ Though Wisdom did not go into details here, stories about the family being sent pictures and videos of their migrant relative's torture are not uncommon.

with IND¹⁶ after a year and a half or get married to someone with papers. He considered going back to Nigeria, as a couple of his friends decided to do. Wisdom thinks their families 'charmed' them to come back. When I asked him what that meant, he said charming happens a lot in Nigeria and "each time it works": your enemies make you weak, they make you give up. However, Wisdom decided to stay and try to settle here. He also considered going to Sweden where his sister lived, but his spirit told him not to go – it didn't feel good.

The church where Wisdom gave his testimony did not live up to his expectations. Community members did not show any care for his situation, nor did the pastor ever return his calls. Wisdom said he didn't mind donating money to the church, as long as he would get some encouragement. He calls the way they treat him 'unchristian'. He was glad to have found another church community in the city, warmer and more supportive.

Around the time of IND's negative message, Wisdom got involved in a Pentecostal international movement that emphasizes 'holiness', which refers to following a walk of life according to certain ethical principles. When I asked what that looks like, he gave the example of a recent women's conference about how to raise your kids and be loyal to 'African views on marriage' while in Europe – he called this 'God's will'. Wisdom became part of this movement and volunteered in international conferences as a musician which brought him to Belgium and Germany.

When I asked him about his opinion on Europe's immigration policies, he replied he understands the government makes the rules – though he also thought they should be lenient towards people who stick to the rules like he does. As long as he gets his documents in a year and a half, he is fine with it. However, one aspect that he opposes is that the system encourages one to lie: as residence permits are given to people who claim to be gay or lesbian, people claim to be gay or lesbian. Once they tell this lie, they will try to practice it and then little by little actually become gay or lesbian. And once they are, they have a big problem and feel cursed. Wisdom knew examples of this from Italy. Clearly, this is the devil's work: the devil influences European 'worldly' leaders, and subsequently these leaders only accept people who are 'worldly' like them. Next to that, he wonders a bit indignantly why it seems easier for women to get a residency permit, especially when they have children or are childbearing.

Wisdom tried to find work in the Netherlands for some months, which turned out to be very hard. He experienced some depressed periods. After a couple of months, Wisdom moved to Belgium. Through his networks he had heard it would be easier to find a job there. Wisdom shared with me a song he wrote about his experiences: about the dangers of traveling to Europe, about what he had seen in Libya, about how God saved him through grace, and about how he is not going to give up but keeps looking to the future. Though Wisdom intended to warn people about the dangers of the journey, it wasn't a song to warn people not to embark on the journey. Most of all, it was a song to thank God.

From this vignette we can see many themes emerging that are important in designing and developing the analysis of how participants in this research voiced their views on the role and significance of various forms of religion in their lives.

1. One emergent theme for analysis from this vignette is spiritual power (both for good or for bad) in the understanding of what is happening in one's life and why it is happening in the way it does
2. A second emerging theme is that of belonging to a spiritual and/or religious community and the extent to which the community is able to take care of one's material and immaterial needs
3. A third is the significance of power, authority and control, more in particular the functioning of religious authority
4. A fourth is narrativity, personal history and the manner in which telling the story of one's life can be enveloped in religious terms, speech and signification
5. A fifth is religious aspiration, that is, the extent to which hopes, desires and aspirations become formulated and positioned in and through a religious domain

In the context of human trafficking, it is striking to note the relative casualness with which Wisdom speaks about being sold. Also remarkable is the fact that he did not have to take an oath, since he was able to travel by himself. While these are existential and at times deeply troubling experiences, the question is how in his or other participants' cases, religion may provide a space to articulate these experiences and to provide a ritual space in and through which personal matters can be dealt with.

16 The Immigration & Naturalization Service of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security.

4. SPIRIT

The first section of this chapter (4.1) focuses on key themes within the hermeneutical dimension of religion. The second and third sections focus on the functional dimension. See above, section 1.1 where we introduce this vital distinction.

4.1 Spirit and speech

To all participants, the spiritual world is a reality. It precedes any classifications such as Christian, traditional, Islamic, or any other 'tradition' or 'religion'. However, the straightforward question whether one 'believes in spirits' yields answers that point in another direction or at least, seem to do so and thus may confuse many. It is this ambiguous discursive relation to the spirit world that forms a key to understanding the religious landscape of West Africans living in the Netherlands and Europe. The following cases demonstrate how in speech this ambiguous relationship with the spirit world is expressed:

Adelia told me about an episode in her life when she still lived in Sierra Leone. Adelia thought her stepmother had used voodoo, as since she was with Adelia's father, he did not show as much care as he used to. Personally, she did not believe in voodoo. "I don't understand" I said to Adelia, "you say you don't believe in voodoo, but you also say it's real". Adelia replied, somewhat proud to tell me her secret: "It don't work on me! It don't work on me because I pray".

This kind of communication puzzled me at the start of fieldwork. With time, I came to understand more about it – though I sometimes had to adjust my own style of communication, as is shown in the next example:

Grace, a Nigerian woman who I had met this afternoon at ORG2, was visibly annoyed by my interest in 'African religion'. She seemed reluctant to talk to me, but for some reason returned to me towards the end of the afternoon in order to explain the diversity of West African religion. She indicated that religion is something different to everyone. She herself went to a 'white church' (= Dutch church), but God can be found in any church where they teach from the Bible she said. There is also a lot of diversity among West African churches. I listened to the numerous examples she gave and told her that this enormous diversity in beliefs and practices is exactly what I want to find out more about. I explained that this is important to know for a larger audience.

I could tell my intent was appreciated, as she enthusiastically advised me to visit Nigeria because of its religious diversity. She started telling me about this diversity and came to mention church-like kind of places in which religious specialists (priests) work with water spirits. She assured me that although these spirits have power, they only have power over you if you are among the people associated with the place of worship. This power works 'among themselves' but it does not work if you believe in God. I asked if these places have something to do with Mamiwata (a particular deity/spirit), upon which her face sort of closed up, as she said, "I only know one spirit".

I experienced many more instances like this one, where the conversation would hit a wall and where I did not completely understand immediately, but acknowledged the content as being crucial in understanding why and how people can speak about religious experiences as well as where the difficulties are located in doing so. People clearly did not want to tell me everything, or at least not at that particular time and place. An example from an interaction with a Pentecostal pastor:

Though he confided in me that he did not like to talk about these things as a Christian pastor, he was willing to tell me a lot about the functioning of shrines in Nigeria. When I visited his church service the next Sunday, he exhorted his parishioners through his sermon not to believe in "those things, I don't know what they are called, these strange-looking little statues, some people call it juju or something" – behaving like he did not know about these 'satanic' things at all although he definitely knew more.

In terms of our analysis, what we are learning from these cases is that first of all there is no automatic and self-evident relationship between understandings of the world of spiritual powers and the ways in which these can be put in words, can be the subject of speech and articulation. This is all the more important because we cannot expect that when asked, people will be prepared or able to voice all their concerns about the world of religion and spiritual powers in words and open speech. This is a crucial element in our analysis as professionals concerned with West African migrants may need to understand that when they aim to perceive of the significance of religion for their clients there is not always room for a (Western) cultural expectation of all being open for discourse.

Some West African Christian leaders that I touched base with during fieldwork told me about their stance on the spirit world and its relation to Christianity:

I am talking with a married couple on a mission. Coming from Nigeria, they observe an enormous lack of spiritual awareness and spiritual aid in the Netherlands – which

they aim to relieve. They give me countless examples of people who were in need of spiritual help more than anything else: people who keep entering depression or experience a sudden and inexplicable fear of getting in a car. Also, victims of trafficking usually need this spiritual help. However, in the Netherlands this kind of help is hard to get by. You cannot even find it in churches – that is, white churches. Dutch church communities are very much focused on ‘the Word’, my participants say. “Even though the Bible speaks of spirits, white churches don’t go into it. They say the spirit world doesn’t exist. It’s obviously in the Bible, but they don’t believe it. European churches don’t go further than listening, talking, praying and referring people to other organizations. However, what we want to do, is to set up a holistic organization and a fundamental approach. Because only if the spiritual dimension is right, people can change and grow. Only then it is helpful to start working on all other aspects like the material, the physical.”

In another conversation with this couple, we came to speak about this spiritual dimension again. They tell me that mediums are just as real and able to tell you the future. “But we believe in only one spirit that’s clean. (...) Most books don’t talk about the future. But in the Bible you can find history, the present and the future. If you work with the Holy Spirit, you can see the future. In fact, we were told three months ago that you would come to visit us as a researcher.”

Another experience with a West African Christian leader:

I’m almost at the end of my fieldwork, and I am in a conversation with a Christian pastor I’ve been in touch with over the course of my fieldwork to share some of the observations I have made. One of them is a certain kind of continuity between what is academically called ‘ATR’ (short for African Traditional Religion, a collective name for the traditions that have been practiced in Africa since before the Christian mission) and Christianity. I can feel that something about this discussion does not quite resonate with my participant, but I cannot pinpoint exactly what. He starts explaining that ATR is a name for what was going on in Africa before the Christian mission: when people still venerated many different deities and spirits. Though Christianity knows many spirits, as a Christian you should only accept one. “But what does it mean to accept?” I ask. “Does it mean you acknowledge the existence of spirits, or does it mean you confess loyalty to those spirits?” My respondent’s answer is clear: “Both. You know, you can read about demons in the Bible. ‘Demon’ is the Christian word for deities or spirits. There is also witchcraft in the Bible.” He goes on to explain that Christianity is monolatrous, meaning only one entity (spirit, god), is to be venerated

and worshipped. In order to live like a Christian, it is important to know that God is greater than anything. Demons exist, but they are not so important. If you are a child of God, you don’t need to fear anything. Some people think they are bothered in their goals and ambitions by a familiar/ancestral spirit that they need deliverance from. As a Pentecostal pastor, he can cast out those demons.

The next topic I share with this pastor, is what I had heard from another participant who said certain marine spirits (Mamiwata) are very powerful in the Netherlands. She related this to the moral state of depravity the Netherlands are in (legality of gay marriage, etc.) as well as the lack of spiritual power displayed by pastors who grew up in the Netherlands (as opposed to Africa). My respondent burst out laughing. These marine spirits are not at all powerful, he said. Even if you would sacrifice an entire goat, they would still be completely ineffective. In Africa however, it would be a completely different story.

Asking about spirits did not present the researcher with straightforward insights into the world of spirituality. Though one may say that one ‘does not believe in voodoo’ or ‘only knows one spirit’ (that is, the Christian Holy Spirit, part of the Holy Trinity), this does not imply one does not believe in the existence of spirits or the effectiveness of dealing with these spirits through shrines, oracles or whatever other mediums. It is rather a way to say one does not associate with these kinds of spirits thus affirming one’s loyalty to Christianity and the corresponding repertoire of rituals such as praying and going to church.

In addition, the act of saying that one believes in or does not believe in certain spiritual powers, seems to be decisive in the way that one might invest them with power. In this sense the phrase “I don’t believe in Mamiwata” may rather articulate the position one wants to take in acknowledging or not acknowledging if such a spirit can have an effect on one’s life. In this way, a discursive space is created in which the effective power on one’s life can be denied whilst at the same time maintaining the sheer existence of the spirit.

Making statements is generally an important practice in Pentecostal Christianity. As also Knibbe describes, it is way of bringing reality into being by saying it. One is able to find a variety of examples of this kind of ‘naming and claiming’ in Pentecostal circles, going from ‘you are healed in Jesus’ name’, ‘you will be alive healthily to witness the new Nigeria in Jesus name’ (in the context of the #EndSARS movement in October 2020) or again in the statement ‘this month prosperity and success will fall upon you’ (Knibbe 2018, p. 656).



Next to these spiritual phenomena, through Covid-19 I experienced another unseen phenomenon through fieldwork and was able to compare how people dealt with both.

When the first Corona cases started to appear in Europe at the end of February 2020, some of the respondents forwarded 'predictions' about the virus in our group chat. These predictions appeared in a novel by Dean Koontz, and in a book about the 'End of Days' containing 'Predictions and Prophecies about the End of the World' by psychic Sylvia Browne. The group was quite worried, which prompted me to emphasize how new flu viruses circulate each year, that the death rate of this new virus was very low and that it would suffice to keep to hygiene prescriptions. In other words: repeating what at the time was the government's science-based perspective, which I trusted. Reflecting on this situation during lockdown, I realized that the group's worried outlook, confirmed by the predictions, had come way closer to reality than our science-based government perspective.

At a social event in August 2020, I was invited to a club. According to my information, clubs were not supposed to be open at this time due to government regulations. I shared my puzzlement with the Nigerian guy who had just invited me. He replied: "I don't believe in Corona. Do you believe in Corona?" I asked what 'believing in Corona' meant to him. He was not one of those 'conspiracy theorists' who believe the whole pandemic to be a lie used by the government or multinationals to subdue the population. Also, he did believe the virus to actually exist. So, what did he mean? He explained: "You can take precautions, but we Africans focus on the positive. That's why we say we don't believe in it."

This conversation helped me interpret a conversation that I had with a Nigerian respondent a few months earlier. She told me she was 'not afraid' of the virus because she believed in God. However, she was very motivated to keep to the safety measures being taken at her workplace.

The fieldwork experience about 'believing in Corona' aptly demonstrates the parallel way of handling unseen hazards such as spirits or diseases (which in fact may have a spiritual component as well). Like electricity, love, or the free market, one does not have to actually see a phenomenon in order to act upon it by, for example, sending a text to the guy you fancy, turning off a machine in order to save electricity, or execute a market analysis before launching a new product. There are many similarities to growing up in a particular system of belief such as belief in a spirit world which is something you have always heard about, you've grown to trust the experts, and you probably experienced it 'worked,' as is indicated by the above example of

Covid-19 predictions.

When we compare the above statements about the virus on the one side and the statements about spirits on the other, we see each one is evaluated very differently despite their crucial similarities:

I am not afraid of voodoo / I do not believe in voodoo	I am not afraid of Corona / I do not believe in Corona
Because I believe in God	Because I believe in God
But I do take precautions	But I do take precautions

Many professionals and volunteers working with West African migrants may understand the statement that one 'does not believe in voodoo' (or Corona for that matter) as meaning that these things do not exist and do not threaten them. However, one needs to adopt a framework that acknowledges the power and significance of the use of language in order to understand the spiritual reality and the choices people make to deal with this spiritual reality.

4.2 Spirit, (mis)trust, and authority: questions of discernment

How to determine if the cause of one's headache is merely physical or also spiritual? How to discern between malicious and harmless spiritual activity? How to interpret the meaning of a dream? Though social support and aid workers aim to assist in finding the right answers to these questions, their answers rarely hold up for migrants in the context of a spiritual worldview. This question of discernment (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2012; Richie, 2013) will be addressed in this section. Moving from a question of discernment concerning the true nature of spiritual forces, we will see how this becomes translated into a discernment – and therefore critical engagement with – religious authority and leadership.

4.2.1 Spiritual discernment

As fieldwork continued, I grew familiar with an ever-wider spectrum of spiritual reality, not limited to one particular religious tradition:

Sunday morning in a West African Pentecostal church. A church bulletin was lying on the pew before I was seated. It read: "Where do mediums and spiritists get their 'amazing' information and insights?" The text explained that there exist two different types of mediums: most of them are clever con artists who get rich by offering 'phony

cold readings', but there are also mediums who "have opened themselves up to the spirit world and have become channels of knowledge from Satan". It continues to read that though it suffices to not believe the first type of charlatans, this second type could in fact be dangerous: "The false knowledge and direction which comes from Satan through a medium is intended to bilk you of your spiritual vitality and freedom." The bulletin offers practical advice in these instances: "When a New Age medium purports to channel a person from the past into the present, realize that it is nothing more than a familiar spirit or the fraudulent work of a con artist." As well as a prayer: "Lord Jesus, You are the way, the truth and the life. I renounce any power or revelation from any other source than You."

I was talking to one of the respondents I met through my activities at ORG1 about the purpose of my research: that I wanted to learn more about West African religion through my involvement with ORG1 and ultimately publish a report about what I learned. After all, religion – especially the spirit world – is something quite unfamiliar in the Netherlands, and I would like to improve the understanding of the experiences of West Africans living here.

The respondent agreed it is important to write about this kind of thing: the spiritual realm is a reality, and when things happen in your dreams, they do/will really happen. If your dream tells you about an accident, it will happen to you for real. And all diseases have a spiritual cause, next to their physicality. Things like reading hands and reading tarot cards are real too. The mediums who use these practices are able to see in the future. Also, pastors are able to have visions. "So all these things can be real. But how do you know whether to trust what people tell you about the future?" I asked. She replied that usually, it is not good for a person to know that an accident will happen to them. That is why a really good pastor will not tell you about the future accident, but instead will interfere on your behalf: he will ask God to let only good things happen to you.

In another conversation, this respondent and me are talking about what kind of church she goes to, what she hopes to find there, and what constitutes a real 'man of God' – in other words, how a good pastor is somehow to be distinguished from the bad ones. She tells me that first of all, you know someone is spiritually powerful when he has visions: he or she knows things about you that you didn't tell them. A good pastor will see a lot about your future but will only tell you what is good for you to know. Next to that, a pastor needs to preach powerfully. Another thing that is very important to my respondent and which led her to join her current church community, is

deliverance. A pastor should be powerful enough to deliver you from spirits that hold you back in life or bother you. Not all Pentecostal pastors hold this equally central, nor does every pastor qualify equally. According to my respondent, pastors who grew up in Africa are usually more powerful than their European counterparts.

These instances of when people discuss the true nature of spiritual and pastoral powers, and how to distinguish the good from the bad, the powerful from the deceitful, the true from the false, indicate the question of discernment. Discernment in this instance implies the capacity to make a distinction and to be informed (religiously, morally) on how to make and apply such distinctions. Asserting the true nature of spiritual power is therefore crucial in these religious matters and depends on specific religious traditions and convictions in a situation of religious diversity. There is, in other words, never a singular, straightforward answer.

The researcher often came across differing assertions of spiritual power. In the fieldwork experiences in section 4.1 there is already an example when the religious leaders tell her they were able to foresee my coming. There are countless such examples depending on the specific religious tradition or conviction of the speaker. This is another one, this time from a Vodun spiritual priest:

In my education as a spiritual priest, I have learned to be respectful to other religions. But many churches have fake leaders. They come to our temples at night to receive power. You know how Christian pastors make their members 'fall in spirit'? They don't do it with Christian power, it's power that they got from the temples at night.

Later in our conversation, the priest showed me pictures of a man with an enormous belly. This man had spent five months in Dutch hospitals, but the doctors did not know what to do or what was wrong. He was sent home to die, thinking there was nothing more they could do for him. Then the man asked for a consultation with the priest. The priest could not heal the man in the Netherlands, so together they travelled to West Africa for a visit to an oracle (shrine). I was presented with pictures that were taken at the oracle, before and after the ritual. The pictures show the man with the enormous bare belly once again and the same man with a miraculously normal belly next to a bucket full of watery liquid. The pictures also show other cheerful attendees, posing with each other and the Vodun priest.

"It's not about religion, it's about power." The Vodun priest sharply distinguishes between the good ways to use that power such as in Vodun, and the bad ways to use it: juju, voodoo, black magic. The latter is associated with money and quick fixes, while

the former is associated with harmony with nature spirits. There is real power in both, but a lot of the bad side consists of intimidation and not of real power. He also tells me that the tradition of Vodun is 'closed-off': prying eyes from Western journalists or researchers are usually not appreciated. If you really want to learn about Vodun, you will be tested for sincerity. It will happen that you ask someone to tell you about Vodun, and they will say they don't know anything about it. Later you will see the same person at a ritual, so you know they just wanted to test if you are sincerely interested in learning. Any journalist who comes to West Africa for a documentary on Vodun will be treated to a 'theatre play' but will not find out about the real Vodun.

Another time, I was talking with a Nigerian pastor in a local church community when she said:

"You know, I have friends who are Muslim. Sometimes they ask me to pray for them. To them it's really surprising: they come back to me to tell me "you know, when you prayed for me it really worked!" (...) Nigerians know: spiritual things work. That's the difference between African and European Christianity. We Africans believe in spirit and in force, and that includes Satan and voodoo power. Africans know there is something that controls life. They want to know what's better than voodoo. European Christianity is more about love. I believe in both: love and spirit."

Through these remarks I found out that the question 'what works' is very important in recognizing spiritual power and authority. During my activities at ORG1, I came across more strategies of discernment such as dreams. It was striking that these issues often had something to do with trust and mistrust.

At a session one of our group members called Blessing explained how she was happier and achieving more since she started sharing less about her life with her social environment. She had made this decision after a woman she met only once at an international church crusade [event] had phoned her to tell her about a dream. In this dream, God told her to tell Blessing to share less of her personal life with others. Blessing, who was already thinking of making a change, followed the advice. She explained to me: "You know, we Christians believe what we dream". The other participants praised Blessing's decision, and agreed it is wise to keep to yourself. The participants recalled a (Nigerian) saying to each other: "You get rich hiding yourself", thereby reaffirming the wisdom in Blessing's decision.

4.2.2 The discernment of authority; critical engagements with leadership

The participants were very critical about church communities and their leaders. They used different strategies as to how to distinguish the good ones from the bad or fake ones. They criticized religious leaders who were after money (emphasizing there are many such pastors) and mistrusted the sincerity of religious leaders' convictions and beliefs – even the ones who were not after money, and even the ones whose churches they were part of. Despite powerful preaching from the Bible, it is still possible that the pastor worships certain idols in his heart. The following cases demonstrate these concerns:

I asked Blessing about her religious life. She told me she did not go to church anymore because she didn't find one of her denomination nearby. Public transport was too expensive for her. She did pray a lot though, and occasionally she participated in special events like conferences or 'crusades'. At one of those events, she got the bracelet she was still wearing. However, she would prefer to wear another since she does not agree with the text on this one. It said something about the "God of my prophet". Religious leaders choose from a variety of titles such as pastor, bishop, priest etc. 'Prophet' in this case is meant to refer to a religious leader who has visions. Blessing would prefer to read something like 'God of Abraham and Isaak' or 'Almighty God', because who knows which god the pastor worships in his heart?

At another moment, Blessing and I are discussing the church of a pastor we both know. She explains why his church is not as big as it used to be: "This pastor tells the truth, he speaks from the Bible. That doesn't appeal to a lot of people. Other pastors don't work like that, they just want to make you feel good so that you give them money." "So you cannot trust that kind of pastor. But then, who goes to their churches?" I ask. Meanwhile, one of the other participants had joined our conversation. She replied: "Criminals go there, because they don't like to be told what they are doing is wrong."

These kind of stories about money grabbing pastors came up often. Combined with the competing claims of spiritual power as the one mentioned by the spiritual priest above, I wanted to know more about my respondent's relation to religious leaders.

Staying on a bit longer after a computer-class I offered, I asked "What makes a good pastor?" One of the participants explained: "It is very important that the pastor teaches from the Bible. You can never know someone's heart, so I don't know if he's a good pastor. Only God knows. So for me, it's important that he teaches from the Bible."

This question about 'knowing someone's heart' as a question of discernment was also addressed in other situations:

At another instance, when discussing an interpersonal conflict, another respondent I met through ORG1 explained a basic tenet of social relations: "You never know the mind of the other person" – this fundamental belief urged her not to just assume you can trust what someone does with the information you share with them.

At one of the sessions at ORG1 we discussed what kind of superpower each of us would like to have. Our discussion moderator told us she was unable to choose between being able to fly or being able to read thoughts. The group responded shocked and a bit agitated – reading thoughts?! it will be necessary to defend ourselves from her prying mind!

These experiences show that the displayed attitude of mistrust respondents is not limited to religious leaders only but can be interpreted as a rational choice based on the idea that one can only know their own spirit.

4.2.3 The question of discernment in a domain of religious plurality

As discussed in the previous section, all things spiritual are to be reckoned with. These things include (but are not limited to) reading the future through tarot cards, clairvoyant mediums and the reality of dreams. The question is not whether these spiritual things exist, but it is rather how one should cope with these powers, which powers are to be trusted and which, on the contrary, are dangerous and powerful, that is, requiring discernment. The answer to the question how one should handle this relation to the spiritual world is highly contested – both between and among representatives of the various traditions. How to recognize what is benevolent and what not in this unseen world?

Competing claims of authority are being made on all sides, including among representatives of the same religion. For example, many Pentecostal churches adopt a critical stance towards the morality, truthfulness and efficacy of other Pentecostal communities. The discussion within the West African migrant community is concerned with the truthfulness, authenticity and power of one's tradition and the falsehood and powerlessness of other traditions. These claims of truthfulness and being genuine are often backed up by proof. This proof can consist of pictures and stories that prove the power of one's own tradition: evidence of healing, an accurate prediction of the future, or a ritual object or practice that is 'successful' – proving that a certain prayer effectively averts misfortune or a spiritual attack. Also, stories that prove the falsehood of other religious leaders, practices or communities are recounted within the community.

In the above field work experiences, we read a claim by a Vodun/traditional priest that Christian leaders get their power from shrines and temples. Interestingly, this claim is also made by Christians themselves who claim that some Christian leaders are in fact 'fake', 'phony' or even 'satanic'. They distinguish between 'real' Christians, and the 'fake' ones who use unchristian powers and (if they are church leaders) even build their churches on 'juju'. This is morally unacceptable among Christians, and the conviction there are plenty of fakes out there adds to the urgency of distinguishing between 'fake' or 'compromised' and 'pure' Christians. It does not at all affect the overall authority of Christianity, but simultaneously it reaffirms the power that is in 'tradition'.

Because it is generally accepted that spiritual powers do exist, anyone who handles spiritual powers in an effective way should be able to, for example, foresee the future regardless of their denomination (Christian, Vodun, etc). And thus, traditional ritual specialists (like Vodun priests), do agree that also Christian pastors can use this kind of power – either aided by a shrine priest or accessed independently. Vodun leaders that the researcher met show a tolerant attitude towards these practices. Though they preserve the privacy of their clients, they do claim that pastors visit shrines – reaffirming the traditional priest's own power and efficacy while simultaneously devaluing Christian power and authority.

This discursive conflict, with its contesting claims of power, authority and effectiveness, does in fact not result in the disqualification of either side. However, it does stress the importance of adopting a critical stance on who to rely on (and to what degree). This is reflected in the fieldwork experiences where the respondents display an attitude of mistrust towards religious leaders. The same attitude can be recognized in the remarks on (the impossibility of) knowing what goes on in the other person's mind. They indicate that 'the other' is fundamentally unknowable unless he or she reveals herself, for example through speech. As one is unable to know the plans of the other person, it is wise not to share too much about oneself. It is advisable to adopt an attitude of mistrust, both in church communities (extending to religious leaders) as well as outside of religious spheres.¹⁷

While the topic of 'spirit' thus on the one hand leads to questions of speech in how people talk about it, express their views, hopes and anxieties in an idiom that highlights spiritual experiences, we can on the other hand also see how the same spiritual world conjures up questions of discernment in view of what can be trusted and what is true.

¹⁷ See Carey (2017) on attitudes of mistrust and the relation of mistrust to spirituality.

4.3 Religion and mobility: responsibilities, opportunities and constraints

In addition to the hermeneutical question of how the spirit-idiom allows people to express their concerns about the nature of personal relationships and the sentiments they attach to these in view of trust/distrust, mortality/immortality as discussed above, the next angle of research is equally important. This concerns the relationship between spirituality religious community and questions of support. Here is a factor of translation at play; namely ideas concerning the translation of spiritual power and inspiration into forms of material and social support.

4.3.1 Notions of spirituality, and the support of aspirations of upward social mobility

Though church communities differ in their relation to spirits, in some instances the support offered in achieving goals was of a spiritual nature. One of my respondents explained to me that if you experience any troubles in your life, this could have a spiritual cause. If you are working hard to get a promotion but still do not get it, it may be possible that a demon spirit is hindering you in achieving your goals. In that case, protecting oneself against or delivering oneself from this spirit is an important part of the solution.

A Nigerian church leader said that for many African migrants it is “a question of faith” to embark on the risky journey to Europe. She commented on how the church can provide a space of comfort and support for African migrants:

“People went through a lot by coming here, some crossed the sea by boat. Subsequently they are denied asylum. And even if they make it all the way up here, it is not an easy life at all. They wonder: where can I find solace, where can I find people of my own skin color?”

Though the church can help in some ways by providing material support (e.g., through its network of community members), several church leaders stressed that they had to keep to Dutch law and thus were unable to provide shelter. In these examples we see that both dimensions are of importance in understanding the role of religious communities in supporting migrants.

In the migrant community, people encourage one another to press on, and to hold on to one's dreams and ambitions. In church services, this took shape in prayers for work, income and papers, and declamations that one would not be 'marked for failure'. We can see in the case of Wisdom (see the Vignette) how this kind of encouragement is much needed in the difficult circumstances of living an undocumented life. Next to this spiritual support, local church commu-

nities and international religious networks function as a network of individuals who can offer a variety of social support: financial support, housing, relevant information, job opportunities, and increased mobility. Wisdom received all of these types of support from both his local church communities and the transnational movement he had joined, from regular community members as well as community leaders. Through his involvement with a non-local transnational religious movement, Wisdom was able to form relations in Belgium where he would supposedly be more able to find work. In terms of religious networks, Christian churches and organizations were the most prominent for respondents such as Wisdom.¹⁸ Next to these religious networks, he also used other networks for support. It should be noted that churches are not the only type of networks that are available to migrants: many national, regional and ethnic networks offer similar kinds of support; it is however difficult to ascertain how the level of social support offered by the religious communities compares to that of these other networks.

As is the case with the respondents in the previous chapter, Wisdom did not relate uncritically to the religious communities he was part of. He criticized how Christian values such as charity and loving one's neighbor were not, in his opinion, practiced sufficiently in these communities. He subsequently made a choice to invest in communities that were more in line with his ethical standards and offered him more encouragement and emotional and material support. We see here that the two dimensions of religion, the functional and the hermeneutical, are both important in Wisdom's attachment to religious communities. The support that is offered can also be of a spiritual nature – though it should be emphasized that the spiritual and the material are very much connected. We observe this for example when Wisdom is rescued from the Mediterranean Sea after a 'strong man' had prayed effectively. We also recognize this in situations where people feel their lack of success may have a spiritual cause. In such a case it may be necessary to deliver oneself from a spirit that is holding one back from reaching one's goals. It is worth noting that churches differ in terms of the importance that is ascribed to the spiritual as a domain in which material affairs can be negotiated.

Several respondents emphasized how proud they were to be able to support family or friends in West Africa. Also church communities and political parties organized charity events to support communities in Africa. None of the respondents in this research expressed they felt ritually bound to send money home. However, there were several instances in which people recounted stories about other people who were 'charmed' by family members or friends in Africa, how sup-

¹⁸ Though West African Muslims are present in the Netherlands, they are far less represented than Christians. Participants associated Vodun traditions mostly with the West African context. Several said it would be impossible to have a substantial Vodun practice here, because some elements of the tradition (like using chicken blood) would not be accepted in the Netherlands.

posedly performed rituals put spiritual pressure on the overseas migrant to remit money. These rituals are believed to result in a variety of problems for the migrant, from failure in professional life to mental illness, possibly even leading to suicide.¹⁹ Within the religious landscape, there were several responses to this threat. Traditional spiritual leaders for example offer services to find the cause of the problem and send the menacing spirit back to the person who sent it in the first place. In church services, Christian leaders often addressed these pressures, something that caused considerable reaction from the community, indicating the relevance and reality of this subject. Some Christian leaders stated that it was 'demonic' to send money home as this would indirectly sponsor shrines.²⁰ These expressions give us a hint of not only the moral and religious dimension of such pressure, but also raise questions about the financial aspects of the 'religious market' (see Finke & Stark 1988). Though this topic merits further inquiry, we observe the contours of how religious and spiritual help is offered within the pluralist religious landscape.

This observation leads the way to addressing how our respondents also make an impact within their religious spheres with social and financial capital. We read that Wisdom is aware he is supporting a particular faith community by coming to church and donating his money, but he is also critical of what he gets in return in terms of moral, spiritual and practical support. Other respondents were also critical of how religious leaders (especially pastors) handle financial matters. This and other matters of personal preference led them to associate with several different religious organizations at the same time and/or combine their religious affiliation in one community with another. Rather than to speak of a static religious identity, it would make more sense to consider the idea of religious mobility within a 'religious market' in which religious leaders as well as their followers are in a more equally interdependent relationship.

4.3.2 Notions of the importance of and support for motherhood

In our interaction with respondents, the theme of motherhood often came up as a central issue.

I am in a conversation with Bessie:

-How's your husband doing? Bessie asks.

-He's okay... Actually, we had a little argument this morning.

-Why?

-Some household affairs. I don't want to be his mum, you know.

¹⁹ Whether these effects derive from social pressure or the spiritual rituals themselves is not the most interesting question for us at this moment: more important is that afflicted people experience both.

²⁰ And the other way around: many participants, including but certainly not limited to Vodun specialists, indicated that Christian leaders were after money too much. See also the remarks in 4.2.

No, Bessie did not know. She did not understand at all why 'being a mother' to one's husband would be a bad thing. While I perceived 'mothering someone', taking care of things for someone else, as something negative which interfered with my own ambitions and plans, Bessie's associations with mothering were strongly positive: for her it is a matter of love, and one of the most powerful things in the world. In another instance, she told me it is nice to have a kid, because 'he will be like a friend to you'.

Other respondents were equally convinced of the positive qualities of motherhood, and if they did not have children yet, having a child was one of their most important ambitions. They did not understand my own lack of desire to have children. When asked about their motivations for having children, they listed a number of reasons. Prominent among these was the expectation of getting older. As Vic says:

"It's so nice to see them grow up, to have them around, you can teach them what you know, you can trust them, you can talk to them. In Africa, we don't put our elderly in care homes. Maybe someone will be aggressive to your oma [Dutch for grandmother], how can you know? Maybe someone will tell her aggressively 'put on your socks!'. If you say it to your grandmother, you can be nice, make some jokes, talk to each other and say 'put on your socks'. It's different. When you're older, you will have someone to take care of you. (...) I just want to have a family; I want a full house during Christmas."

Motherhood appeared to be a central theme in the lives of the respondents. The above examples demonstrate not only how having a family relates to the desire to bear offspring, but it also becomes clear that having kids can function as a form of social security. Trust is not cheap. To have people to rely on, people who 'are like you', is very valuable, especially when you're older. In addition, from other conversations we learn that having children is seen as helpful in alleviating feelings of loneliness that life in Europe and in the absence of extended family-relations is often experienced by the participants.

Furthermore, to be a mother is counted as a huge blessing, according to the respondents. Also in church services mothers were revered and if women did not yet receive the blessing of having a baby, people wished and prayed this joy may fall upon them too. Pastors may play a role in encouraging married couples to 'let the babies flow'. Interestingly, pastors and community members can also support forms of 'transnational motherhood' or the 'transnational family' (see Mazzucato & Schans 2011) when a mother would decide to leave her children and travel overseas in the hope of finding a better future; the hope and aspiration thus becoming a legitimation for becoming (temporarily) separated from the children which is not being defined as

becoming a 'bad' mother, but instead as being a mother on the road to success which eventually her children will also enjoy, as the following case shows;

It was a festive celebration, this Sunday morning at the end of the church worship service. One of the church members had turned 50 and celebrated this with the community. As part of the celebration, she recounted her life story. I didn't understand some parts of the story because they were in Yoruba and unfortunately, these were exactly the parts that got the strongest reactions from the community. However, I did understand she travelled to a non-EU country in Europe on a visa years ago and decided to overstay to cross over to the EU. Her children were still in Africa at the time. She recounted only some of the hardships she went through (like being raped at gunpoint), but emphasized she never gave up: she was 'no lazy girl', she worked hard and now here she is: she has a family and lives in Europe. Winners never quit; quitters never win. She thanked the pastor for all the support she had received in building up this life, thanking him "with every drop of blood in my body" – judging by the reaction from the community, she was not the only one who was grateful for the pastor's role in their lives.

Clearly, the celebration in the church highlighted a combination of achieving status and success for this female member of the community, and the fact that also her children benefitted from her going through all the hardships she faced in the course of her life. Successful motherhood, in other words in this celebration is more than bearing children and raising them, as it is equally related to enjoying the support of the church in this life-trajectory from which all benefitted. This experience also shows how these stories of hardship have their place in faith communities, though we also need to stress that not every person or story is equally supported – we call to mind how Wisdom felt ignored and unsupported in his local church community. Not every church community may give equal space to these narratives and may prefer some narratives over the other. More research is needed to unravel how migration narratives are linked with a person's position in church. It is however not possible to conclude on the basis of the collected insights if women with children might hold different positions in the social fabric of church communities than women without children.

Whether and in what ways having children may have an impact on the process of obtaining legal residency was subject to rumor and hearsay. In general, the question about what increases chances of legal residency is surrounded by (implicit) questions, assumptions and suspicion. Among the participants it was discussed whether and under what conditions giving birth to a baby may help to obtain residency rights in the Netherlands or in other European countries. In some cases, children of the respondents had received confirmation that they could stay in the Netherlands even before their mothers did. In the Netherlands, both legal and illegal minors have access to health care and education as it is considered key for growing into

healthy and successful adulthood. If Dutch citizenship is granted, the children have the chance to build a life in Europe – or elsewhere, as being an EU citizen also allows for mobility.

Respondents indicated that being mothers they seek 'greener pastures' in Europe for themselves and their family indicating how the next generation reaps the benefit of their parents' hardships. One of the respondents for example stated that her mother was, in the words of the respondent, "one of those women who were told they would get a job in Italy but then when they arrived, they had to do, you know, something else". This 'something else' is usually meant as a euphemism in view of avoiding the use of terms such as prostitution or other forms of sex work. The respondent was a couple of years old when her mother left for Italy and joined her in Italy in her teens. She now holds an Italian passport which enables her to work legally in the Netherlands. Her mother currently lives elsewhere in Europe. The trouble her mother had gone through decades ago, now results in enhanced mobility for her and the chance to work legally in the Netherlands with all the benefits that come with this. In this case, the mobility that the mother of the respondent had achieved, resulted in upward social mobility for the next generation.

The respondents in this research felt that being a mother brought power, joy and love. Leaving children behind for a period of time when parents seek a future elsewhere through which they will be able to place themselves and their offspring on a road to further success is as such not uncommon in many West African family contexts whereby the extended family (grandparents in particular) often take up responsibilities for raising the family (Mazzucato et al., 2011; 2015). This is on the one hand in line with observations from Oyèwùmí (2016), who introduces the concept of 'matripotency' to interpret the strong and powerful connotations of motherhood in Yoruba society which resonate with those of other West African ethnicities. On the other hand, it also tells us something of the extent to which churches also acknowledge the fact that although they in principal support the idea of the nuclear family (husband, wife and their children), the temporarily re-arrangement of the care for children in view of achieving socio-economic success is not morally rejected.

Though this pilot study has gathered some material regarding motherhood, religion and migration, this is in no way exhaustive. It has touched upon several contexts in which the respondents relate certain ideas about motherhood. Further research could reveal the practical, social, spiritual and religious meanings associated with having children within a context of mobility.²¹

21 Kastner (2007, 2013) has made important observations on the social and practical meaning of motherhood and having children for Nigerian women related to their trajectories to Europe and within Europe itself. Oyèwùmí (2016) introduces the concept of 'matripotency' to interpret the strong and powerful connotations of motherhood in Yoruba society.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this concluding chapter, we wish to summarize our findings as well as indicate pathways for (1) *further future research* and (2) suggestions for a better understanding of the population, aimed at strengthening and enriching the work of professionals and organizations concerned with these migrants, and at the *development of professional training programs*.

These recommendations can be found throughout the chapter and will be briefly summarized at the end.

Throughout this report, we noted how the functional dimension is as vital in finding ways to travel and survive as is the hermeneutical dimension which offers ways of understanding and expressing these experiences. Religion relates to the complex reality of West African migrants in a hermeneutical sense in the way religion expresses concerns about and critical engagements with spirituality and its impact on the nature of religious authority, trust and religious belonging. On the other hand, religion relates to this reality through a more functional perspective in which questions of social and material support become important, also in relation to the functioning of a religious community.

Each of these two dimensions can be further analyzed and understood in relation to the three features of the **groundedness** of religious experiences, the **openness to the foreign** in a religious plural and also secular environment that the Netherlands is, and thirdly the way in which each of these two dimensions inform us about questions of **relationality and connectivity** with regard to belonging and the religious community (sections 5.1-5.3). For a further account of these features as they appear in the relevant literature, see section 1.2.6.

In our research we have looked at how religion and mobility (see in particular section 4.3) are intertwined in several different ways. Mobility and the aspiration for a better life can be interpreted as a question of 'faith' and hope, in which spiritual support is necessary. In this respect, aspirations of mobility do not differ so much from other aspects of life such as health or career success, which are also predicated upon a beneficial state of spiritual affairs. Here we see both the hermeneutical dimension of religion at work (faith and hope), as well as the functional dimension (as in how health, jobs and material success can be achieved). In the West, the general idea about migrants' and victims' faith and affiliation to churches is that it is 'OK as long as it offers them (moral) support'. However, this take on religion and its human functions may not be enough to understand and help migrants adequately because it fails to acknowledge the entanglement of these two dimensions as well as the entanglement of the spiritual and material world.

In drawing attention to both dimensions, we aim to increase 'cultural sensitivity' towards West African migrants who may have been potential victims of trafficking, by specifically highlighting and exploring the role of religion, religious practices, concepts, organizations and leadership. Professionals and policy makers face the challenge that cultural sensitivity works best in two directions: opening oneself to the cultural 'other' but also critically relating this to one's own frame through which one understands the world. Many professionals and policy makers recognize the importance of this challenge; a better insight into and sensitivity for the western narrative of secularization, in which religion tends to be limited to an individual's moral support and personal way of seeing the world, can help to fulfill this challenge. Such a self-reflective perspective goes hand in hand with a radical respect for what is, as we demonstrated in chapter 4, fundamental in the religious landscape of West African migrants: the realm of spirits as a real and true factor of importance in the world and one's life. This spiritual world is probably more essential than denominations such as 'Christian', 'traditional' or 'Muslim'.

5.1 Groundedness

The groundedness and this-worldly-ness of African religion, in which the spiritual and material are intertwined, can be observed in the two dimensions through which we have looked at spirituality and religion. We call to mind the example of the (spiritually) 'strong man' whose praying resulted in Wisdom's boat being rescued from the Mediterranean Sea.

- In terms of the functional dimension, from this example it also becomes clear that the relation of the spiritual to 'earthly' matters such as health, success and prosperity is of vital importance and are central themes in religion. As such, it does not hold up to the idea that the role of religion is limited to existential and personal well-being. In order to understand these religious notions well, this groundedness should not be viewed as a form of 'magical thinking' to be overcome through the process of modernization.
- In terms of the hermeneutical dimension this groundedness leads to questions and observation of individual choice and autonomy because of the fact that spirituality as an undercurrent in life, in regard to a plurality of religious traditions and as a domain of expressing one's tribulations does not take away their agency. Instead, it fosters a range of critical engagements. This report shows that being grounded in spirituality does indeed imply that the respondents are able to exercise their agency, and *relate* to the spiritual powers as 'partners', rather than being subjected to them. Within this relation with the spiritual world, decisions regarding motherhood, religious affiliation, gender roles and kinship relations are made.

This spirituality appears to foster a range of critical engagements (with leadership, authority, community, intimate relationships) that the following sections also highlight.

5.2 Openness towards the foreign

We observe openness towards the foreign, for example in the question of discerning which spiritual methods work and which do not work. Though the discursive boundaries between different traditions (Christianity, Vodun, Islam) can be razor-sharp, in practice the most important question seems to be what specific rituals and powers work best for a particular individual so as to influence the course of events. Though other traditions are sharply criticized or even demonized in Pentecostal churches, it has also been observed this does not mean that non-Christian practices are believed to be ineffective. From our research it becomes clear that the spirit world, whether articulated in Christian, traditional or other forms of religion, does play an important role in migration and mobility in general. We observed in particular the pressure migrants may face in remitting money back home, and how their spiritual and religious needs were handled in the plural religious landscape.

- In terms of the hermeneutical dimension, this translates into the question of judgment and discernment: for the participants in this research, it is vital to be able to distinguish between false and good prophets and pastors, between the material and the spiritual aspects of a (health) problem, and where spiritual power can be found. This question of discernment indicates that for the participants themselves there is an issue of 'belief' when they offer statements that tell us that they "no longer believe in this or that form of spirituality", since this may be a way of protecting themselves spiritually. Hence, it is important to avoid reading this dynamic of discernment and protection as a sign of insincerity.
- In terms of the functional dimension, the respondents demonstrated a sharp critical ability in many areas of life, including their openness not only to different religious & spiritual manifestations, but also to the Netherlands' context as well as world of support & care organizations that they met. We emphasize this in order to stress how these migrants are political actors who direct their own lives in relation to their constraints and opportunities. This critical capability was not only noticeable in the religious sphere, where they criticized religious leaders who did not meet ethical criteria. They were conscious of the means they invested in certain religious communities and their influence as actors within the religious market. There was a critical engagement with West African politics, with authorities and with gender roles and expectations, as much this also holds true also for the relationship the participants had with aid and social support organizations, once again showing agency and managing their help resources strategically. In that sense the religious field was instrumental to them as a social space, extrapolating critical engagements to other contexts as well.

5.3 Relationality and connectivity

We observed that our participants formed part of a web of relationships which were characterized best as relations of interdependence. They took pride in being able to (financially) support family members elsewhere or community members in the Netherlands. These relations of interdependence are also delicate because of the precarious situation many West African migrants find themselves in.

- In terms of the hermeneutical dimension, we saw several ways in which connectivity and relationality also played a role in the participants' lives in spiritual ways: for instance, the spiritual forms of coercion that migrants had to relate to, and having to defend oneself from unwanted spiritual influence, for example through the act of speech as we referred to in the above paragraph as well. We can also connect this to the reasons for adopting an attitude of 'mistrust' in which participants needed to 'close' themselves off from prying minds. Further research is needed to explore and deepen our understanding of, for example the familial bonds that exist between relatives in Europe and Africa and what this relationality means also in spiritual terms to migrants who may have been potential victims of trafficking.
- In terms of the functional dimension, it can be noted that whereas West African migrants are highly mobile in their adherence to a specific religious community (Salvation Army, 2018), in the current research it was clear that participants were critical about which religious community to invest their time and money in, balancing costs and benefits.

5.4 Toward cultural sensitivity: recommendations

Summarizing the conclusions formulated above, we bring our recommendations under three umbrella themes, all of which are aimed at increasing cultural sensitivity.

1. Work towards a more holistic understanding of West African religion through paying attention to the functional and hermeneutical dimensions of religion and the three features we have pointed out: groundedness, openness towards the foreign, and relationality & connectivity. Again we emphasize that cultural sensitivity and thorough understanding entails a critical awareness of one's own cultural history of religion and secularity and frame of reference. Awareness of and reflection on the power dynamics that inform the intercultural meeting of West African migrants and the professionals working with them, could form a first step in setting up the dialogue on a deeper level.



2. Widen the focus on the nexus of religion and migration. Human trafficking is not the only sphere in which migrants' situations are established in relation to the functional and hermeneutical dimensions of religion. We call to mind the various ways in which they experience support and coercion through religious means. It is also recommendable to establish more connection between the contexts of academia and practice, as well as research carried out in both contexts.

Whereas we looked at lived religion in this pilot study, it is recommendable to also look at connections between religion and politics. Though some authors have pointed to the influence of Christian organizations and movements on political discourse around human trafficking and its accompanying notions of victimhood,²² further in-depth research is necessary to explore whether and in what ways these lines of influence have played out in the European and Dutch context. We will also need to look at the ethics and underlying ideas about religion and secularity and their influence on migration policy. Western-European ideologies of personal freedom are strongly connected to a narrative of secularization and are reflected in migration policies.²³ These ideologies in turn influence the narratives of migrants themselves and possibly their relation to religious communities and support networks. Further research is needed to discover how the process of migration and the attempts of migrants to obtain legal residency influences the hermeneutical way of understanding oneself (self-narrative) in the context of religion and spirituality.

3. Increase attention for migrants' own agency and autonomy in all spheres of life, such as that of spiritual discernment, religious affiliation and ambitions in life. This should also lead to active acknowledgement of the migrants' critical engagement to religious authority, politics and aid organizations. It would be advisable to be more attentive to the needs put forward both explicitly and implicitly by West African migrants. This includes not only material but also spiritual needs. The question therefore is how in a context of Dutch professional care and support justice can be done to the problem of the spiritual and religious concerns of their clients, while appreciating the concerns that these clients express themselves about the hermeneutical and functional dimensions of religious experiences.

Avoiding an approach of West African migrants in which they are to be introduced to a more secularized embrace of 'rational' and 'positive' kinds of religion and spirituality; the challenge and perspective for social support workers and policy makers is to acknowledge the critical engagements of the migrants themselves. The voices of a small, selected population of migrants presented and analyzed in '*A Question of Faith*' can help us to turn this perspective into reality.

22 See for example Bernstein & Jakobsen (2010) and Zimmerman (2013).

23 See for example Knibbe (2018) on notions of modernity, secularity and sexuality in relation to migration and migration policy.

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