

Religion, Migration and the New African Diaspora: A Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

The new African diaspora has emerged from the recent migratory movements of Africans. This population is tasked with finding effective methods of adjusting to new environments. Through the psychoanalytic lens of object relations, this article explores the role of religion in shaping migration

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experiences of the new African diaspora. It considers the psychological processes that intersect with religion to influence migrant adjustment. First, drawing from object relations theory, the role of early relational experiences in shaping self-concept is conveyed. Second, ways are explored in which religious phenomena can support transitional processes within a migration context. Third, the object relations framework is used to review some of the psychological tasks involved in the migration experience (e.g., processing of attachment disruptions, expansion of cultural identity). It is theorized that a migrant's relationship with the sacred represents a transitional phenomenon that contributes to positive adjustment via a post-migration experience. The article concludes with some practical considerations.

Keywords

identity; migration; new African diaspora; object relations theory; religion/spirituality; transitional processes.

Introduction

African migration has evolved and continues to transform as the world changes. Literature discussing the African diaspora began to surface in the 1950s, though mostly focusing on how transatlantic slavery brought millions of African people to what was then described as the 'New World' (Rotimi et al. 2016). The historical transatlantic movement of the African diaspora contrasts with recent transnational migration of Africans to countries in America, Europe and Asia, which created a new African diaspora that is largely a product of voluntary migration of Africans seeking education, employment, asylum and other opportunities abroad (Flahaux and Haas 2016; Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009). Life can be challenging for the new African diaspora,² as these individuals are faced with the realities of social adaptation, cultural inequities, racism, loneliness and underemployment in their new abodes (Counted 2019a, 2020).

Many migrants experience the strain of adjusting to new environments (Conroy 2016; Counted 2019a, 2020; Obinna 2013). Research has found that migrants from Africa often integrate themselves into new countries by attempting to find a balance between adapting to local socio-cultural norms and maintaining their own cultural and national identity

2. The new African diaspora consists of two broad groups of migrants: those who were the first to migrate to another country (sometimes referred to as first-generation migrants) and those who were born in the host country (sometimes referred to as second-generation migrants). Research has found that first-generation migrants tend to experience different challenges to those of second-generation migrants, but both groups are often confronted with difficulties associated with transculturation (Clark 2008).

(Akinade 2007; Alex-Assensoh 2009; Obinna 2013). Maintaining this balance is a challenge that migrants navigate in a multitude of ways. One way of looking at the experience of migrants in their new abodes is through the lens of religion, as many African diaspora communities draw heavily on religious/spiritual belief systems (Nnamani 2015).

Religion in Africa has a complex history, interwoven with its history of colonization (Cowden, Counted and Ho, in press). Although traditional African religions dominated prior to the colonization of Africa, Christianity and Islam are currently the dominant religions in the region (Aderibigbe 2015). Christianity has been steadily rising in Africa over the last two decades, with approximately 50% of Africans religiously identifying as Christian (Johnson and Zurlo 2020). Africa is projected to continue to grow as the center of global Christianity. While Christianity is declining among European Christians, it is rising steadily in Africa. In 2015, 26% of Christians originated from sub-Saharan Africa. Based on current demographics and trends, it is projected that by 2060 more than 40% of Christians will be from sub-Saharan Africa (McClendon 2017).

Islam is the other dominant religion in Africa, where approximately 40% of the population identifies as Islamic (Cowden, Counted and Ho, in press). Whereas Christianity is concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, Islam is most prevalent in northern Africa (Pew Research Center 2012). Similar to trends within Christianity, Islam is increasingly becoming localized within Africa. Recent estimates indicate that about 16% of the world Muslim population resides in Africa, which is projected to increase to 27% by 2060 (McClendon 2017). Africa is expected to become the second-largest center of Islam, behind the Asia-Pacific region.

Although adherents of traditional African religions are now the minority among Africans, traditional religion continues to infuse with contemporary religious and spiritual practices (Cowden, Counted and Ho, in press). The influence of traditional African religions can be seen in the rise of African Pentecostalism, which emerged from African spirituality and African Initiated churches (Eriksen, Drønen and Løland 2019).

Religion may be a common means of maintaining well-being, as it provides an avenue to express cultural identity in new environments (Akinade 2007; Counted 2019a, 2020; Obinna 2013). In comparison to local citizens who are likely to have an established social network that they can rely on for support, migrants—who may be geographically separated from loved ones—may benefit from turning to psychospiritual resources. In comparison to local citizens who may have wide access to healthcare resources, migrants at the margins of society may need to look to psychospiritual resources as a means of negotiating their quality

of life due to their health and social inequality. Akinade (2007: 96) notes that migrants of African background tend to be more religious than they were before migration, emphasizing that ‘religion is one of the important identity shapers that help them preserve individual self-awareness and cohesion in a group’ and ‘allow [them] to maintain self-identity, achieve communal acceptance, and incorporation into the civic community’. Empirical studies have found that religious/spiritual experiences can be particularly helpful to the new African diaspora (Adogame and Spickard 2010; Asamoah-Gyadu 2014; Counted 2019a, 2020; Idemudia and Boehnke 2020; Lauterbach and Vähäkangas 2019). Africans may navigate life in foreign lands by identifying, organizing and reconstructing their religion in a way that caters to their psychological needs and creates an intermediate space for their identity continuity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2014; Counted 2019a).

Research suggests that religion has an important influence on post-migration adjustment and identity continuity within African diaspora communities (Adogame and Spickard 2010; Akinade 2007; Obinna 2013). In this article, we explore the role of religion in shaping migration experiences of the new African diaspora. Much of what is known about intersections between religion/spirituality and migration experiences of the new African diaspora derives from anthropology, sociology and theology (Conroy 2016; Olupona 2007). Little is known about the way in which psychological processes might interact with religious/spiritual experiences to influence the new African diaspora. Using a psychoanalytic framework, we discuss the junction between religion and migration as a psychological process. Drawing from an object relations theory, we explore how religious phenomena (i.e., internalized God representation, religious experience) might support the fulfillment of psychological tasks that contribute to healthy adaptation of the new African diaspora in their new environments. We also consider how these psychospiritual experiences can promote post-migration identity adjustment, creativity, adaptability and psychic integration.

Relational Psychoanalysis and Object Relations Theory: An Overview

Freudian psychoanalysis stemmed from the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, who saw religion as a representation of the unconscious mind. Feuerbach’s work inspired Sigmund Freud, who continued on to conceptualize the psychological foundation that drives religion. Freud drew from Feuerbach’s drive model, arguing that religion is a *wish-fulfillment*

and the reflection of a child's physical relationship with their father. Post-Freudian psychoanalysis had a much different view of religion, though still recognizing it as a reversion to *childish* thought patterns or behavior that tells the story of the individual's needs for security and protection from a divine guardian. Post-Freudian psychoanalysis moved away from 'Freud's instinctual model of human motivation and was replaced with an essentially relational vision of human beings' (Jones 1996: 24). This theoretical shift began with the work of Ronald Fairbairn, who introduced object relations theory (ORT) and expanded Freud's drive theory by placing personality development in the context of relationship experiences (Hamilton 1988). ORT posits that personality and one's self-concept are forged through early relational experiences (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983).

According to Winnicott (1965), the first stage of development occurs in the context of a *holding environment*. The holding environment has both figurative (i.e., emotional attunement) and literal (i.e., bodily, physical) dimensions and refers to the environment that the primary relational object (usually the mother) cultivates. ORT posits that the self emerges in the context of a holding environment (Hamilton 1988), which facilitates individual growth and creates the foundation from which the individual can relate to and use objects (Ogden 2016; Winnicott 1965). By using objects, people mentally create transitional and internalized objects to take over the function of the previous holding environment (Ogden 2004). A transitional object is any object that has the qualities of the primary relational object transferred onto it (Winnicott 1953). For example, when a caregiver's warmth, care and nurturance are transferred to an object, such as a child's blanket or teddy bear, it becomes a transitional object for the child (Winnicott 1971).

Transitional objects are critical for healthy development and adaptation, as it is the use of these objects that facilitates the transition out of the original holding environment to the vagaries of the external world. Transitional phenomena occur within the intermediate space of interaction and experience or *transitional space*.³ It is within transitional spaces

3. Winnicott (1971: 2, 135, 138) introduced the terms 'transitional objects' and 'transitional phenomena' to describe the intermediate area of experience. Transitional phenomena refer to the interweave of subjective experience and objective observation. Winnicott (1971) uses 'potential space' and the 'third area' to describe the space between the infant and mother, or between the individual and their cultural environment. It is in this potential space that transitional phenomena can occur. In this article, we use the term 'transitional space' to broadly describe the space from which transitional phenomena and intermediate experiencing occurs.

that the individual does the work of identity development, exploration and adaptation, as transitional phenomena foster creative and adaptive processes that support a person's sense of self (Conroy 2016; Jones 1991; Meissner 1986). Individuals use transitional objects and space throughout the lifespan for emotional regulation, meaning-making, continuity of identity, self-cohesion and creative expression. Children use transitional spaces (e.g., play) to develop and integrate their identity at key developmental periods. Adults continue to use transitional space (e.g., cultural and religious experience) to facilitate identity adjustment. Cultural and religious experiences, such as art, poetry, music and prayer, are means of accessing transitional space (Conroy 2016; Jones 2018; Winnicott 1971).

Attachment theory (Bowlby 1988) emerged from the relational paradigm of post-Freudian psychoanalysis. Bowlby's attachment theory is complementary to Fairbairn's ORT, although both theories were developed independent of each other. Unlike ORT, which focuses on the internalized representation of a relational object, attachment theory focuses on the internal working models that consist of expectations one has about the self, others and the world. Internal working models are developed during relationships with primary relational objects and loved ones who are perceived as attachment figures. Those internal working models are put to use when people explore and develop social relationships outside of those to whom they are attached.

Attachment literature suggests that adults create affective attachment bonds with people, places, divine entities, culture, animals and non-living objects that have anthropomorphic attributes of objects of attachment, partly due to the increased cognitive maturation in adults compared to infants (Ainsworth 1963; Bowlby 1988; Counted 2018; Counted, Possamai et al. 2020; Keefer, Landau and Sullivan 2014). The first significant bond typically occurs with a primary relational object, which shapes the inner working model of attachment that a person applies throughout life (Pietromonaco and Barrett 2000). However, separation from objects of attachment can cause grief, alienation and disorientation (Bowlby 1988). Recent developments within psychology have extended attachment theory to objects beyond person-to-person bonds, leading to new ways of thinking in relational psychoanalysis (Keefer, Landau and Sullivan 2014). This paradigm shift has inspired new perspectives on religious/spiritual experiences (Counted 2018; Counted, Possamai et al. 2020; Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990) and people-place experiences (Counted 2018; Counted, Neff et al. 2020; Counted, Possamai et al. 2020) as adult attachment relationships that

are precipitated by inner working models. In other words, human behavior in relation to incorporeal objects can be explored from the lens of attachment (Counted and Zock 2019; Granqvist 2020).

Theories of relational psychoanalysis emphasize how early interpersonal experiences are internalized as mental representations, a process that leads to the formation of relational templates which shape future expectations, experiences, and patterns of relating to the self and others (Hamilton 1988). These relational bonds support the ‘maintenance of mental representations of the self and others’ and facilitate continuity of identity, helping individuals make sense of and adapt to their environment (Pietromonaco and Barrett 2000: 155). In the context of a secure attachment, the object of attachment serves as a *safe haven* that people can turn to in times of distress and a *secure base* from which one can explore the world (Ainsworth 1989: 710). An individual’s experiences with their relational objects of attachment may influence their experience of ‘felt security’ and ability to regulate self-esteem and self-soothe (Bretherton 1985: 6). How a person internalizes and establishes bonds with relational objects (both external and internalized objects) has implications for their migration process.

Religion as an Object Relations Phenomenon: Internalized Representations of God

Rizzuto (1979) drew theoretical insights from notions of God⁴ as an object representation (Fairbairn 1952) and transitional object (Winnicott 1971) to explain the origin of religion in her synthesis of ORT. Rizzuto (1979) defined religion as a transitional phenomenon centered on the representation of God, which is internalized as an imaginative construction that is both created and found by the individual in a transitional space of experience. This relational paradigm of religion allows the individual to represent the sacred based on an endless list of emotion-laden descriptors (e.g., benevolent, comforting, protective) that reflect how God is experienced and *internalized* (Barrett 2000; Garzon 2007). The internalized divine object is influenced by one’s mental representations

4. The term ‘God’ is used in this article to describe a supernatural Being that is considered Divine or Sacred. The term captures the variations of religious belief systems within the new African diaspora that recognize God as the Creator of the universe and an invisible Divine entity with power over nature and humanity. Whether or not people can internalize the representation of God is not a psychological issue but rather a philosophical concern. We therefore use the term God interchangeably to mean a Divine entity, the Sacred, or Supernatural.

(Davis, Moriarty and Mauch 2013), which shapes the way religion is experienced in a transitional space as an object relations phenomenon. In this case, the internalized object of experience is usually a divine entity. When the God object is updated through each crisis of development, it continues to be relevant for the individual throughout life (Rizzuto 1979). The self and one's representation of God are intimately intertwined; when internalized representations of God change, one's sense of self may also evolve (Moriarty 2007; Rizzuto 1979).

In the context of relational security with a divine entity, an internalized God representation can be called upon during times of distress. Just as a child may internalize a nourishing caregiver to self-soothe (Meissner 1986; Jones 2007), an internalized God representation can soothe emotional pain and religious/spiritual struggles (Davis, Moriarty and Mauch 2013). The use of an internalized God representation has been found to moderate psychological distress among religious people (Bradshaw, Ellison and Marcum 2010), promote post-migration adaptation (Counted 2019a), and contribute to migrant quality of life (Counted, Possamai et al. 2020). However, it is important to note that a person's Divine representation does not always imply a positive relational experience, such as in the context of religious discrimination and religious/spiritual struggles.

While religion and spirituality are widely used as adaptive methods for reducing migration stress, it is important to note that religious practices may also lead to discrimination and further marginalization. Discrimination has been demonstrated to exacerbate psychological distress among migrants, and literature suggests that this could also include religious discrimination (Idemudia and Boehnke 2020). For example, Muslim migrants have a higher risk of discrimination when moving to Western countries where they often face religious discrimination, stereotyping and Islamophobic attitudes (Idemudia and Boehnke 2020). In such cases, religion may be both a resource that enables people to cope and a source of further discrimination and isolation.

Secondly, when a relationship experience with a Divine entity involves religious/spiritual struggles, one's God representation may be associated with higher levels of psychological distress (Abu-Raiya et al. 2015). The development of a person's representation of God is a complex phenomenon that can develop through multifaceted and interweaving factors (e.g., beliefs about God, cultural and gender influences, past relational experiences), which should be considered when thinking

about how the new African diaspora may draw upon an internalized representation of God (Hoffman 2007).

Migration Tasks, Religious Representations and the New African Diaspora

Migration can be a highly disruptive experience as one works through attachment disruptions associated with geographical separation and place change (Sangalang et al. 2019; Streeck-Fischer 2015). Attachment disruption occurs when one is separated from a relational object (e.g., a divine entity, geographical place, loved one), which can elicit defensive responses that seek to reestablish the disrupted attachment (Counted, Neff et al. 2020; Counted 2017; Kobak, Zajac and Madsen 2016). Processing attachment disruptions during migration may involve working through the multiple changes and losses that typically unfold (Conroy 2016). One of the main challenges for migrants experiencing a disrupted place attachment with their home countries and cultures is being able to retain an authentic self that is true to one's cultural values and is not obsequious to the social expectations of a dominant culture. According to Conroy (2016), this is the part of the self that fosters the sturdiness a migrant needs to successfully navigate the stressors of migration. It is on this basis that Conroy (2016) introduced psychological tasks of migration that facilitate healthy adaptation to one's new environment. Two migration tasks are provided as the framework for understanding how religious representations of the internalized relational object facilitate identity adjustment and self-continuity of the new African diaspora: 1) processing attachment disruptions and 2) expansion of cultural identity. As the new African diaspora moves through the task of processing lost connections with their African ancestral homes and loved ones, it frees them up to be able to expand their cultural identity.

Task One: Processing Attachment Disruptions through Religious Representations

Migration often involves a challenging process of dislocation and relocation, which can lead to multiple attachment disruptions occurring at once. The disruption of attachment can occur with one's geographical separation from home countries and loved ones (Counted, Neff et al. 2020). Attachment disruptions represent severe threats to the attachment bond and can result in feelings of anger, fear or sadness (Kobak, Zajac and Madsen 2016).

Two patterns of adult attachment experiences that are often significantly disrupted through migration cycles are place attachment and cultural attachment. Place attachment speaks to the person-place bond humans create with places of significance (Counted 2016). Disruption to place attachment is the psychological loss of connection to place, and it can impact negatively on a person's sense of security (Kobak, Zajac and Madsen 2016). Unlike sociology or anthropology, which tend to approach culture as an entity to be studied, cultural attachment theory suggests that culture is a functional entity that provides psychological security in the face of threat (Yap et al. 2019). Cultural objects and symbols (e.g., food, language, customs) carry emotional value and learned meanings, which make culture an imagined transitional space for security and safety. When cultural attachments are disrupted, this can also interfere with the objects, symbols and rituals that hold meaning to a group of people. It can also disrupt the affective bonds that are often shared between members of a cultural group (Chao, Kung and Yao 2015). While separation from cultural objects and rituals can cause attachment disruption, culture can be internalized and held in one's mental memory network (Hong et al. 2014). Through the use of internalization, one can continue to be emotionally attached to a shared culture (Hong et al. 2014).

Both place and cultural attachments are multifaceted, involving dimensions that provide support for identity-adjustment and continuity in the face of a new culture and environment. Hence, the disrupted attachment experienced during a migration experience can cause multiple losses to occur at once. This attachment disruption may be particularly profound for migrants who make up the new African diaspora and whose homeland often serves as the basis of their identity (Alex-Assensoh 2009).

Disruptions to multiple objects of attachment can interfere with a person's ability to effectively process what has been lost (Conroy 2016; Counted, Neff et al. 2020). When these losses are not appropriately processed, it can cause an individual to psychologically withdraw and threaten one's sense of self (Conroy 2016). During times of attachment disruption and disorientation, migrants often look to a holding environment or secure base from which to process, explore and acknowledge their grief of losing something valuable to them (Counted 2020). The loss of a cultural holding environment can compound attachment disruption experiences. Similar to the integral role that Winnicott's (1965) holding environment plays in healthy psychic development, one's

cultural environment offers a similar holding capacity. As observed in Conroy's (2016: 80) work, 'cultural "transitional space" is a place of experimentation, play, tension release'. Therefore, losing that kind of 'cultural environment and its valuable cultural objects could be experienced as the loss of the known and caring mother/father'. Just as the infant uses transitional objects when transitioning from the maternal holding environment to the reality of the external world, migrants benefit from transitional objects as they transition from their cultural holding environment to the strangeness of a new environment.

Meissner (1986) suggests that religious/spiritual experience shares similar psychic vitality and characteristics as cultural experience. In both cultural and religious experience, people infuse meaning from their inner worlds into objects, symbols and places. Given the psychic similarities between religion and culture, religious experience can help offset the loss of cultural experience as a migrant transitions from his or her cultural holding environment to a new land. For example, a positive internalized religious representation of a caring, available and compassionate God can function as a sort of holding environment that creates a sense of felt security, which can help migrants with absorbing the losses, attachment disruptions, and grief they experience through the process of migration (Counted 2020). Research has found that positive representations of God as a divine attachment figure are positively associated with the quality of life of the new African diaspora and help enhance their sense of place in new environments (Counted 2019a; Counted, Possamai et al. 2020). When migrants in the new African diaspora have access to the positive religious representations of their internalized object, it can provide a sense of felt security and belonging from which to work through the wounds of attachment disruption (Conroy 2016).

Task Two: Expanding the Cultural Self through Religious Representations

Migrants who work through attachment disruptions gain the capacity to move toward what Roland (1988: 6) refers to as an 'expanding self'. This form of self emerges when there is the capacity to hold ambivalent feelings toward both the new and old worlds, resulting in greater psychological flexibility and depth (Conroy 2016). When migration is successful, identity is preserved, enhanced and expanded as migrants work through various migration stressors (Conroy 2016: 141).

Integrating the old and new

The first aspect of expanding one's cultural self involves the ability to link old and new parts of self. Cultural integration is a process that involves continued attachment with one's home culture while incorporating aspects of a new culture. Unprocessed grief associated with attachment disruptions, or ambivalence about one's new culture, can interfere with this process (Conroy 2016). Many migrants navigate a tension between the need to assimilate and the desire to preserve their identity (Conroy 2016: 55). For some, it may be too painful to keep the *old world* alive and migrants may attempt to let go of the life they once had. Unfortunately, when this occurs, a person's 'emotional roots are cut off' and a more 'artificial' self develops (Conroy 2016: 50–51). Even though it may be more challenging to keep both identities alive, finding an appropriate balance promotes psychological well-being and authenticity. To accomplish this task, one needs access to transitional phenomena that facilitate psychological processes involved in supporting identity continuity and adjustment.

Identity adjustment requires adaptation and creativity as a person expands their sense of self to meet the changing demands of life. This is particularly true for those navigating the challenges of cultural migration (Conroy 2016). Transitional space nurtures the psychological resources a person needs to creatively adapt and engage the process of differentiation and reintegration (Winnicott 1971). A rich medium for accessing transitional space is through cultural experience (Meissner 1986). The loss of cultural transitional space is significant. As Conroy (2016: 53) observes, the loss of one's cultural environment can result in a 'diminished creative capacity' for the migrant who needs a cultural transitional space in order to be able to play, symbolize and make meaning as they transition between the 'old world' and the 'new world'.

When a person's cultural transitional space has been diminished, religious experiences may provide a supplemental transitional space from which one can accomplish the important developmental tasks of psychic integration. Religious experiences (e.g., prayer, worship) and traditions (e.g., rituals, stories) offer a 'transitional state of consciousness' that can have adaptive, integrative and expansive functions (Jones 2018: 120), which can support growth as individuals respond to new life experiences (Meissner 1986). Religious experiences involving positive representations of God may help the new African diaspora to create and internalize emotional links between their old and new worlds, thus keeping the old world alive while integrating aspects of the new world.

As elements of the new world are incorporated into the self, the migrant develops a more ‘integrated and expanded cultural identity’ (Conroy 2016: 50). A well-integrated and expanded cultural self provides the emotional sturdiness from which a person can deal with the challenges of the migration experience.

Expanding cultural identity

Navigating and expanding cultural identities can be a rigorous task for the new African diaspora, many of whom experience ethnic tensions on top of their migration stress (Bryce-Laporte 1972; Egharevba 2006). The question of identity is particularly complex and important for the new African diaspora. For example, Akinade (2007: 95) observed, ‘the development of an African identity is very important for African people... because of the constant efforts made in the past to undermine the African identity’. As a result, people of the new African diaspora may be tasked with the work of integrating and expanding their identity within racialized and discriminatory environments that pit their ethnicity against their national identity. Beaman (2017) found that in certain countries (e.g., Britain, France) blackness and national identities are perceived as opposites of one another, with national identity remaining inaccessible to those of color. When a person’s connection to a Black identity corresponds to potential exclusion from national belonging, they may disassociate parts of their identity in order to belong.

Further complicating the identity expansion process, many migrants in the new African diaspora may feel pressured to assimilate into the Black national identity (e.g., African Americans, Black Indigenous Australians). However, in such situations, there is often a hierarchy of blackness present (Jenkins 2019). On the one hand, migrants who are a part of the new African diaspora may experience discrimination from Black nationals. Conversely, they may be exposed to the same racialized stereotypes and discrimination as other Black members of their new society. Smith (2014: 45) refers to this ‘diasporic consciousness’ as the way the new African diaspora see themselves as sharing the same racial struggles and inequalities whilst not being given access to full membership of other Black communities.

Many of the migrants who represent the new African diaspora have the difficult task of expanding their cultural identity in the face of oppression and discrimination. Reflecting on the particular struggles of marginalized Africans in the diaspora, Olupona (2007: 33) explores how migrants commonly use religion to ‘master the tactics’ of the

dominant culture and maintain identity as they undergo various ordeals and stressors. Religion can play a central role in how Africans maintain their identity during the process of migration (Bongmba 2007).

For those who experience discrimination during the migration process, there may be risk of disassociation or distancing a part of the self. However, a critical component of migrating successfully is the ability to expand and integrate the whole self (Conroy 2016). Internalized representations of God can provide vital integrative functions. These religious phenomena can be drawn upon to help bind experiences together, consolidate one's inner world and facilitate identity adjustment. Meissner (1986: 180) suggests that God representation is 'uniquely connected' to an individual's sense of self, as it connects them to the 'meaning and purpose' of their existence and remains available for 'continuing psychic integration'. As Rizzuto (1979: 5) observed, it is within this 'dialectical interaction with a God representative' that a sense of self is forged and maintained. God can therefore be experienced as a relational object among migrants, fulfilling the psychological functions they may not be able to achieve on their own. Amidst the challenges of migration and attachment disruptions, migrants may draw on their experience of God as a relational object during times of crisis (Son 2015). This notion resonates with Counted's (2018) Circle of Place Spirituality model, which suggests that a secure relationship with God can assist with offsetting loss of place attachment and promote a stronger connection to one's new place.

Practical Implications

This article has explored some of the psychological processes that may shape the migration experience of the new African diaspora. We have drawn attention to the positive impact that religious phenomena can have on important identity tasks, which frequently form part of the migration process. Some practical implications gleaned from the applied psychoanalytic perspective include the importance of engaging in activities that promote security and dependability, as well as considering alternative ways of using God representations as a way of coping with the stress of migration-related attachment disruption.

The above analysis points to the potential benefits of creating and engaging in rituals, practices and community activities that promote a sense of security, trust, dependability and safety. Security and trust are critical for one to be able to enter a transitional space (Wilson 2015; Winnicott 1971). Dependability, safety and trust facilitate transitional

spaces, and yet a sense of dependability and felt safety are often threatened by attachment disruptions that occur during the process of migration (Conroy 2016). If an individual's migration experience is overlaid with experiences of discrimination, it could heighten their need for spaces of safety, dependability and trust. Religious experiences, community gatherings, significant social relationships and continuation of cultural traditions may foster a sense of safety and dependability in a way that supports healthy psychic functioning.

Another area in which the new African diaspora can access security and dependability is through an internalized God representation, which can provide a holding environment and offset the disruption of attachments. This may become particularly important for migrants as they enter a new living environment. According to Conroy (2016: 78), the 'success or failure of the physical migration to a large degree will be determined by the quality of the environment that receives the migrant'. For migrants who enter a nurturing, welcoming environment, the loss of their home culture may be buffered by the new environment. Unfortunately, migrants who are a part of the new African diaspora are often faced with a range of social and cultural inequities that stifle their process of successful adaptation (Beaman 2017). Therefore, it may be of greater importance for the new African diaspora to find alternative resources that help facilitate a successful post-migration integration. An internalized religious representation of God may be a useful resource to a migrant, including those of the new African diaspora.

African religious communities can be another space for cultivating safety, stability and continuity of identity. People of the new African diaspora tend to organize their religious communities based on ethnicity, with many experiencing ethnic-based churches as supportive, dependable environments that offer protection against racism, discrimination and other stressors of migration (Alex-Assensoh 2009). African religious communities can support post-migration adaptation through the supportive psychosocial resources they provide. In reflecting on the many resources that African religious communities provide to migrants, Kalu (2007: 77) observes how these communities 'enable migrants to maintain links to the homeland, cushion the rough edges of sojourn, and provide the occasional opportunities to dance the native dance, eat indigenous food, and celebrate the rites of passage'. African religious communities appear to provide a psychologically integrative function by helping people to stay connected to their homeland while they find the means to expand their identity (Counted 2019b). Beyond the stabilization or settlement function of African-led congregations, the community

may also provide opportunities for migrants to develop a positive God representation. Akinade (2007: 93) indicates that the African religious community 'provides a context for experiencing God here and now in the midst of urban chaos, poverty, racism, confusion, anomie, and alienation'. Taken together, these features of African religious communities can help facilitate the creative capacity and psychological sturdiness that people of the new African diaspora may need to continue and expand their identities.

Although both an internalized God representation and religious communities may provide security and dependability for some migrants, religious experience can provoke distress in others (Counted, Neff et al. 2020). Many migrants are drawn to religion/spirituality during times of crisis, but for some the experience of distress that accompanies an absent or indifferent God can result in religious/spiritual struggles and de-conversion (Wright et al. 2011). The challenges of migration can lead to fractures in a person's religious framework or meaning-making system (Conroy 2016). In some cases, the psychological distress of migration may be particularly difficult to deal with, such that finding ways of staying connected to one's cultural home may become critical for healthy adjustment.

Conclusion

Religious experience is a common resource for migrants who are part of the new African diaspora. Using an object relations theory, this article discussed how migrants who access religious transitional space may benefit from identity continuity and creative adaptation in response to the loss of their cultural homes. We argued that a migrant's God representation as a relational object assists with integrating parts of the self together, helping the new African diaspora engage in the difficult process of adapting to their host country. We also explored some of the psychological tasks that may be involved in adapting successfully to migration and suggested that religious experience (e.g., internalized representations of God) can provide the new African diaspora with access to psychological processes that facilitate successful completion of these tasks. Although we have sketched out a theoretical overview of some psychological processes that may form part of the migration experience, empirical studies that examine the religious experiences involved in supporting these processes will enhance our understanding of how the new African diaspora adjust to life in their new environment.

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