# "Winning the Place for Jesus": A Relational Perspective on Pentecostal Mission Encounters in Madagascar

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## ABSTRACTS

Unter Bezugnahme auf theoretische Ansätze von Tim Ingold, Doreen Massey und Christopher Powell entwickelt der Beitrag eine relationale Perspektive auf Ort und missionarische Praxis in Madagaskar. Im Mittelpunkt des Beitrags stehen gegenwärtige Süd-Süd-Missionskontakte und die Versuche eines madagassischen Pastors, in einer kleinen Stadt im zentralen Hochland einen Zweig seiner Kirche aufzubauen: Der Pastor arbeitet für Winners' Chapel, eine pfingstlich-charismatische Kirche aus Nigeria, und hat die Aufgabe, "den Ort für Jesus zu gewinnen". Nach zahlreichen Misserfolgen soll ihm schließlich ein Ritual dabei helfen, die Verbindungen der Stadt mit territorialen Dämonen zu lösen, den Bund der Bewohner zu Gott zu erneuern und den Pastor selbst in lokale Beziehungsgeflechte einzubinden.

Der Artikel versteht "Ort" nicht als gegebene Einheit, sondern als entstehendes und sich veränderndes Produkt relationaler Prozesse. Ein Ort ist demnach keine Arena für Geschichten, Identitäten und Begegnungen, die an ihn gebunden sind oder in ihm stattfinden. Vielmehr konstituiert sich der Ort erst als dynamisches Beziehungsgeflecht durch unterschiedliche Praktiken des Bezugnehmens oder In-Beziehung-Setzens. Abschließend geht der Beitrag darauf ein, inwiefern eine relationale Perspektive nicht nur eine neue Sicht auf "Gegenstände" ethnographischer Forschung ermöglicht, sondern auch auf die akademische Wissensproduktion selbst.

In reference to theoretical approaches by Tim Ingold, Doreen Massey and Christopher Powell, the contribution develops a relational perspective on place and missionary practices in Madagascar. The article focuses on current South-South mission contacts and the attempts of a Malagasy pastor to establish a branch of his church in a small town in the central highlands: The

pastor works for Winners' Chapel, a Pentecostal-charismatic church from Nigeria, and is tasked with "winning the place for Jesus". After numerous failures, a ritual is supposed to help him finally break connections with territorial spirits, renew the covenant of the inhabitants with God and bind himself to the local web of relationships.

The article understands "place" not as a given entity, but as an emerging and changing product of relational processes. A place is therefore not a pre-set arena for stories, identities and encounters that are bound to it or take place in it. Rather, place constitutes itself as a dynamic meshwork of relationships through different practices of relating. In this way, place comes into being as a taking place of relations. Finally, the article shows that a relational perspective not only invites us to take a new look at the "objects" of ethnographic research, but also at academic knowledge production itself.

## 1. Studying Mission Encounters

To win the place for Jesus – this is what Malagasy pastor M. was supposed to accomplish when the leader of his church sent him from the capital city Antananarivo to a town 250 km southward. M. was a young pastor of Winners' Chapel, a Nigerian Pentecostal-charismatic Church (PCC) that today has several branches in Madagascar.[1] The practices of this pastor and his difficulties in winning over this new workplace will here serve as an example of a relational perspective on place and Pentecostal mission encounters.

From the 1990s, social scientists and historians have tended to describe the European Christian missionary efforts in nineteenth-century Africa in terms of "(cultural) encounters". In contrast, the dominant frame of reference for the analysis of contemporary Pentecostal mission in Africa and elsewhere is usually "globality". These divergent approaches mirror the different foci of global/local- as well as space/place-debates referred to in the introduction of this special issue: European mission in the nineteenth century is frequently described as an encounter between actors, religions and/or cultures, where participants indulge in conversations, translations and exchanges. Describing asymmetrical interactions in the colonial contact zone, this view on mission exchanges highlights the "interlocking understandings and practices"[2] and especially the influence of foreign, Christian worldviews on local cultures, as well as the local adaptations and appropriations of Christian (i.e. European, colonial and modern) messages.[3] Recent studies place

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1    Scholars in theology, social sciences or the study of religion define the terms Pentecostal church or Pentecostal-charismatic church (PCC) differently, and accordingly assign different groups or movements to these categories or not, see A. Anderson, Varieties, Taxonomies, and Definitions, in: A. Anderson, M. Bergunder, A. F. Droogers and Cornelis van der Laan (eds.), Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods, Berkeley 2010, pp. 13-29. See below for my own use of PCC.
2    M. L. Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, London 1992, p. 7.
3    To name just a few works in this vein: J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution, vol. 1: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa, Chicago 1991; B. Meyer, Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana, Edinburgh 1999; F. Raison-Jourde, Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au XIXe siècle: Invention d'une identité chrétienne et construction de l'État (1780–1889), Paris 1991.

greater emphasis on notions of mutual modifications as they work within the framework of global history adapting its core ideas of circulations, crossings and entanglements. Nonetheless, the main focus still tends to be on transformations of given rooted places, knowledge systems and practices, foregrounding the ways in which European Christianity manifests itself in the micro-histories of specific encounters at these places.[4]

Of course, some studies of contemporary Pentecostal-charismatic expansion are likewise concerned with processes of locating Christianity in African societies and the results of local appropriations and translations. Plenty of more recent research, however, focuses on the mobility and unboundedness of a Pentecostal meta-culture and the construction of a global, i.e. spatially unbound and unbounded Pentecostal community.[5] On the one hand, this has to do with the self-portrayal of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity that understands its mission as a global project, regarding God's message and the work of the Holy Spirit as universal and thus free from any local specificities. On the other hand, the focus on global flows and meta-culture might also be explained by the academic turn to space. Research in this vein follows the tendency to draw attention to global connections with a life of their own, which only 'descend' from time to time in order to influence given local traditions and historically rooted identities.[6] Although different in central respects, both approaches – whether focusing on lived encounters and localisations or on meta-culture and global unboundedness – are rooted in binary thinking, where the global is connected to abstract space, movement and change while the local is about concrete places, practices and cultural continuities.

Human geographer Doreen Massey and others have criticised such a dichotomous definition of place and space, whereby places are characterised as bounded given entities with a singular identity and an internalised history.[7] She does not argue against place, but for overcoming the dichotomy by looking at relational processes in and through which place and space are constituted. Even though anthropologist Tim Ingold explicitly argues against space as an empty and abstract category, he likewise opts for a relational perspec-

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4   R. Habermas and R. Hölzl (eds.), Mission global: Eine Verflechtungsgeschichte seit dem 19. Jahrhundert, Köln 2014.

5   Anthropologist Simon Coleman for instance speaks of a "global, charismatic 'meta-culture'", S. Coleman, The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity, Cambridge 2000, p. 68. In the same vein: A. Anderson, The Emergence of a Multidimensional Global Missionary Movement: Trends, Patterns, and Expressions, in: D. E. Miller, K. H. Sargeant and R. Flory (eds.), Spirit and Power: The Growth and Global Impact of Pentecostalism, Oxford 2013, pp. 25-41, esp. at 27f. and 40 where he refers to the notion of a global "meta-culture"; B. Reinhardt, Soaking in Tapes: The Haptic Voice of Global Pentecostal Pedagogy in Ghana, in: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 20 (2014), pp. 315-336, speaks of a "repertoire" and a "charismatic norm", p. 319. See also A. F. Droogers, Globalisation and Pentecostal Success, in: A. Corten and R. Marshall-Fratani (eds.), Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America, Bloomington 2001, pp. 41-59, on the repertoire of transnational Pentecostalism esp. pp. 44-46. Birgit Meyer proposes to focus on Pentecostal aesthetics that make up (global) aesthetic formations. B. Meyer, From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding, in: Ead. (ed.), Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion and the Senses, New York 2010, pp. 1-28.

6   Cf. A. Anderson, Emergence, pp. 27-28.

7   D. Massey, A Global Sense of Place, in: Ead., Space, Place, Gender, Minneapolis 1994, pp. 146-156. See also T. Cresswell, Place: An Introduction, Chichester ²2015, esp. pp. 88-114.

tive, defining place as delineated by movement and as a product of relations.[8] In this article, I will build on the relational views which these authors developed in their works on places / spaces. I will argue that a relational perspective helps to go beyond dichotomies (of space / place, global / local, European / African, abstract / concrete) and the either-or-definitions that go along with them. From a relational perspective, we do not have to approach our fields of study as fields that consist of bounded, essentialised entities (places, actors, objects, religions) that connect to other such entities. Instead, we approach them as instances of relational meshworks, that is, as temporary, constantly changing products of relational processes.[9] Altogether, the choice of such an epistemological stance leads to an understanding of lifeworlds as worlds that come into being relationally. In this sense, place, too, is not merely a pre-given container, stage or arena for – in my case – mission encounters, but is emerging in and through multiple relations, which bring forth multiple identities and histories.

In the next three sections, I will first outline the activities of a Pentecostal mission church in Madagascar and follow the young pastor M. through his relations, from which the 'place to win' emerged. I will then summarise basic elements of a relational perspective and link this once more to the activities of the missionary. In conclusion, I will offer some thoughts on the consequences of a relational perspective for ethnographic research on "religious encounters".

## 2. Madagascar Mission

"Nigeria is now becoming known as one of the great missionary-sending nations of the world."[10] This is what the Pentecostal author Peter Wagner stated in 2004 while looking at the "dynamic explosion of the Christian faith in our times"[11] and the role of Nigerian churches in world mission. Wagner himself is the leading proponent of religious notions such as church growth and spiritual warfare – central ideas in today's PCCs.[12] Winners' Chapel International, founded in 1983 by David Oyedepo in Nigeria, is one of these

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8    T. Ingold, Against Space: Place Movement, Knowledge, in: Id., Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description, London 2011, pp. 145-155.

9    See ibid. for the notion of meshwork, esp. p. 151.

10   C. P. Wagner, Introduction, in: Id. and J. Thompson (eds.), Out of Africa: How the Spiritual Explosion Among Nigerians is Impacting the World, Ventura 2004, pp. 7-18, at 14.

11   Ibid., p. 8.

12   C. P. Wagner, Strategies for Church Growth, Eugene 1989. The church-growth mission strategy was developed in Evangelical and later Pentecostal-charismatic circles in the USA from the late 1950s onwards. The goal of church growth is to convert as many people as possible to Christianity in an efficient manner, to increase and maintain the membership of existing churches and to plant new congregations. Donald Anderson McGavran is one of the founding fathers of church-growth mission principles. They are based on the idea that the focus of mission should not be on philanthropy (including education, health care etc.) but on the propagation of the Gospel, on "winning the winnable now", making "disciples of all nations" and thus on planting churches. D. A. McGavran, How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission, London 1959, pp. 9, 5 and 184. One of the main strategies for achieving the growth of the Christian church is to found as many new churches as possible. It is also called

churches.[13] Winners' Chapel has been active in Madagascar since the end of the 1990s. The church started in the capital, Antananarivo, in an unspectacular barrack with Nigerian missionaries, who not only preached but also set up a tough training programme for future Malagasy pastors and other church staff. After some years, the Nigerian missionaries left Madagascar and gave the leadership of the church to a local pastor and his staff. It was him who sent out pastor M. in 2010 to win a place south of the capital for Jesus. Besides skills in management, accounting and leadership, the Nigerians introduced the central teachings of David Oyedepo.

"The hour has come to liberate the world from all oppressions of the devil through the preaching of the word of faith, and I am sending you to undertake this task."[14] According to Oyedepo, these are the words God spoke to him in 1981, mandating him to found a church and start the work of mission. This short sentence puts the central tenets of many of today's Pentecostal-charismatic churches in a nutshell. The devil is described as God's opponent, who tries to harm and oppress humans in every conceivable (material, emotional, physical, financial) way. He has to be fought by informing the world about this struggle as well as about man's divine right to attain here and now what Jesus has won for him, namely salvation, healing, sanctification, prosperity and success.[15] The explicit, positive commitment to the word of God and to faith is central to Winners' adherents, as is the conviction that they will receive what they ask for and claim. According to these word-of-faith principles, faith is a prerequisite for God's action, and the Holy Spirit is considered the power through which success and prosperity are achieved.[16] Thus, Win-

church planting. This is based on the assumption that new churches have a stronger missionary urge and are generally more active in founding churches than those that have existed for longer.

Spiritual warfare is a central topic for many PCCs resulting from their understanding of the world as a battlefield of two opposing forces (God and the Devil). To fight demons and any other expression of satanic forces, these forces have, firstly, to be experienced and/or mapped (spiritual mapping) and, secondly, to be cast out. Persons, objects, houses or rooms can be cleansed through exorcisms; in larger territories demons have to be discovered first before delivering the places. There are several manuals on how to conduct this. See e.g. P. C. Wagner (ed.), Breaking Strongholds in Your City, Turnbridge Wells 1993. See also the analysis from the perspective of religious studies by Sean McCloud: S. McCloud, Mapping the Spatial Limbos of Spiritual Warfare: Haunted Houses, Defiled Land and the Horrors of History, in: Material Religion 9 (2013) 2, pp.166-185. See also below.

13   Today the church in Nigeria is called Living Faith Church Worldwide and David Oyedepo is its leading bishop. In Madagascar and elsewhere in the world, the churches go under the name of Winners' Chapel International X (name of the country and/or town), and are described as branches of the Winners' World Mission Agency. Church members are usually called "Winners".

14   David Oyedepo Ministries International, The Winners' World: The Liberation Mandate@25, [no place] 2006, p. 12, as well as the website of Living Faith Church International/Faith Tabernacle: http://faithtabernacle.org.ng/aboutus (accessed 10 October 2018).

15   For theological positions, see David Oyedepo Ministries International, The Winners' World, as well as the books of Oyedepo and the websites of Living Faith Church International/Faith Tabernacle. For an analysis of these positions: P. Gifford, Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa, London 2015. In August 2010 the screen saver of Pastor M. proclaimed, for example, "Unlimited Success is my Birthright" (in English), and the Winners' motto of September 2017 was "Supernatural Breakthrough is my Birthright."

16   US-American Kenneth Hagin (1917–2003) is considered the founder of this word-of-faith theology, and Oyedepo refers to him as an important influence: Oyedepo Ministries International, Winners' World, p. 11. More about the word-of faith-movement: A. Anderson, An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity, Cambridge 2004, p. 220-224 and S. Coleman, The Globalisation, p. 28-31. The teachings known as prosperity or health-and-wealth gospel are (to varying degrees) also part of the word-of-faith theology. Winners' Chapel

ners' Chapel presents itself as a church emphasising the aspects that describe many recent Pentecostal churches.[17] As the agency of the Holy Spirit and its gifts are central to the lives of pastors and other church members, I prefer to add "charismatic" and speak of Pentecostal charismatic Churches (PCC).[18] In its global mission work, Winners' Chapel aims to motivate people to 'give their life to Jesus', that is, to accept the word-of-faith message and begin a new life marked by a personal relationship to Jesus. Hence, Winners focus on the living Christian faith, which they think is experienced and expressed in the lives of individual believers through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and its gifts (the charismata).

As mentioned above, Winners' Chapel presents a dualistic view of the world as separated into good and evil, powers of God and of Satan. These two sides are in a constant struggle, and the devil uses every opportunity to test and endanger the believer's commitment to God. He/she might experience this as illness or financial trouble. During services which I attended, Winners' pastors in Madagascar combined issues of success and combating spiritual forces many times, and in my conversations with them the danger of witches, idolatry or ancestor cult were mentioned frequently. This is why pastors have to be strong in spiritual warfare, especially when they want to establish a church where they feel that evil forces are strong.[19]

## 3. Winning the Place?

I got in touch with pastor M. through his wife, a young Malagasy woman whom I had met for the first time in 2009 – still unmarried – at Winners' Chapel Antananarivo, and who had then started to give me Malagasy lessons. She knew M. from Winners' Chapel's bible school. When the church decided to plant a church in the town south of the capital – a decision that was taken in consultation with the Nigerian headquarter and the Holy Spirit –, they needed a pastor.[20] M. was the person whom the senior Malagasy pastor chose for this task, so he received a brief additional training to become a pastor. M. asked my friend to be his wife because he liked her and, as a pastor, he should be a

belongs to the word-of-faith strand and has a strong focus on prosperity teachings, inspired by Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. Sermons frequently centre on questions of this-worldly material success, work, discipline, diligence, entrepreneurship, paying tithes and giving offerings. See P. Gifford, Unity and Diversity Within African Pentecostalism: Comparison of the Christianities of Daniel Olukoya and David Oyedepo, in: M. Lindhardt (ed.), Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies, Leiden 2015, pp. 115-135.

17  They are sometimes called neo- or third-wave Pentecostal churches, see A. van Klinken, African Christianity: Development and Trends, in: S. J. Hunt (ed.), Handbook of Global Contemporary Christianity: Themes and Developments in Culture, Politics, and Society, Leiden 2015, pp. 131-151, esp. 133f.

18  Oyedepo as the anointed "man of God" frequently implies an ability to impart or channel the power of God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit and thus to bring about health and success, see Gifford, Unity and Diversity, p. 124f.

19  See S. McCloud, Mapping the Spatial Limbos, for examples of how to proceed in spiritual warfare.

20  According to M., he was sent to this small town because Bishop Oyedepo, the founder of Winners' Chapel in Nigeria, gave the order to plant new church branches all over Madagascar and because the Holy Spirit had told the leading Malagasy pastor that a church had to be planted in exactly this town.

married man. She told me that she was quite surprised and confused as her life plans had not included becoming a pastor's wife, but she finally accepted his proposal. In early 2010, pastor M. travelled to the small town to find an apartment for himself and his wife as well as an adequate assembly room for services and other church meetings. His wife stayed in the capital and joined him only some weeks later.[21]

M. had learnt about spiritual warfare and strategies of church growth in the church's bible school. He had, however, no experience whatsoever of leading a group and establishing a church, and only limited experience of preaching. As to missionary work, he was still very much a beginner rather than a "winner". In terms of a relational perspective, I am especially interested in the relations and interactions that helped to constitute M. as a Pentecostal "fighter" and a "winner" as well as in the relational practices in and through which the "place" he wanted to win emerged. Hence, I am attempting to describe the place and the actors as being made up of relations. This means that they cannot be separated from activities, and as they take form in practices of relating, they are always in the process of becoming and changing. The relations I am looking at are social/personal, conceptual as well as material or sensuous, and do not only refer to processes of connecting (like advising, marrying or commanding) but also to those of blocking or non-relating (like rejecting, denying or excluding).

I visited the couple for the first time in 2010, six months after they had moved to "the place" they were to win and where the young pastor therefore had to plant a church. The senior pastor in the Malagasy headquarters had instructed him to find and rent a meeting place or house, to preach and attract an audience, particularly tithe-paying members; he should not care about or cooperate with other (Pentecostal) churches,[22] but care for his own church and be a strong leader. Via mobile phone, M. was in exchange with the head office in Antananarivo receiving instructions on what to do. On Facebook and via websites and books, he followed "papa Oyedepo", with whom he felt connected through a spiritual link of mentorship and care. For M., Oyedepo's media appearances seemed to impart the charismatic power and anointing of the Nigerian leader and to enable him to experience a share of the Holy Spirit's gifts.

During the first weeks, the pastor stayed in a hotel, whose owners had been members of Winners' Chapel Antananarivo for some years. On his second day, the pastor had received the order (by the church leader in the capital) to become acquainted with the town and its inhabitants. So, he walked around town and talked to people. As he informed me, they had told him right away that there was too much "idolatry" and "ances-

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21  For the following, see also E. Spies, Being in Relation: A Critical Appraisal of Religious Diversity and Mission Encounter in Madagascar, in: Africana Religions (forthcoming).

22  The missionary's work aims both at the conversion of non-Christians and at a "revival" of Malagasy Christianity, which is perceived as being reified in institutions. The town the pastor was sent to has been the centre of a Catholic diocese since 1999, and Protestant and Pentecostal churches are on the spot, too. Many people in this region of Madagascar (including the capital) refer to themselves as Christians, when asked. The region has been missionized since 1820, first by the Congregationalist London Missionary Society; the Catholic church gained greater influence during the French colonial era. See J. P. Daughton, An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880-1914, Oxford 2006.

tor cult" in town. The following night, he was in his hotel room, when he heard an old woman calling him outside his window. Although he was afraid, he gathered up all his courage, stepped to the open window and poured anointed oil onto her. Then she disappeared. He told me that she was a witch. Certainly, the pastor was aware that there are "demonically afflicted" locations – as this is part of the teachings of spiritual warfare. Yet, it was this bodily experience with what was for him a witch which made him understand that he had to actively fight enemy activities in order to win the town for Jesus. Due to the encounter that night, he became aware that he needed to be a fighter to deal with witches and other resident demons, but he also understood that he had to fight his own fears. His body, practices and the objects he used (oil) emerged as weapons of fight and conquest.[23] At the same time, the place came into being as one where evil spirits had succeeded in establishing long-term relationships with other inhabitants and the environment, making them reject him and his church.

However, other interactions made M. aware that his own story with the place depended on different relations and meshworks as well. Contrary to his expectations, the pastor found it extremely difficult to obtain affordable rooms for the church. For many months, he was not able to find a house or an assembly room to rent. Sunday services were held in the communal youth centre because its director felt inspired by the Holy Spirit and wanted to preach, too. Other services and meetings took place in the private home that the pastor had managed to lease. The "head office" was his and his wife's living room equipped with a table, a notebook, a mobile phone, a collection of Bishop Oyedepo's books and some thirty plastic chairs in the corner. Some gatherings of members and interested persons took place in this room. Other meetings took place in the restaurant of the hotel where the pastor had stayed in the beginning and, later, some home-cells were set up, that is, prayer and bible-study groups meeting in private homes. The couple told me that they had visited many people and had seen many suitable houses or meeting places for the church, but no landlord had wanted their business. The owners demanded exorbitant, unaffordable rents and were unwilling to negotiate. This process of unsuccessful search and the ensuing first contacts with property-owning inhabitants defined the project to plant a church not only as a fight; it also constituted the couple's view of "the people here" as too rich, lazy and moneygrubbing. In this vein, they had begun to regard themselves as unwanted strangers who needed to defend their persons and project against ignorance and greed. Thus, the place to be won came into being in the rejection and indirect control the missionaries experienced from potential landlords (supposedly representative of all inhabitants in fending off those who are not part of the town's social networks). In this context, the couple explained exclusion not in spiritual but in material terms of financial disparity, the housing market and missing family ties.

As M. had no house, no money and no family close by to support him, the place of his missionary enterprise emerged as a tissue of restricted and blocked relations. Together

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23    On the role and power of oil in Winner's Chapel see P. Gifford, Unity and Diversity, p. 129: "Oyedepo even claims some originality in introducing oil rituals into African Pentecostalism (where they are now common)."

with the bodily experience of "demonic attack", all this made it clear that the pastor was in need of a strategy allowing him to take part in existing meshwork(s) and to tie those in with his own relational practices.

## 4. A Relational Perspective on Place

M.'s relationship with his superiors, the witch attack and the house hunting have already provided some very brief samples of relationally constituted places and lifeworlds. Understanding place relationally means to look at the processuality and coming into being of places through practices of relating. As I will show below, my notion of relationality is not primarily an abstract theoretical one, but one developed in studying lifeworlds in Madagascar, including Pentecostal ways of world-making. However, before I return to Pentecostal mission in Madagascar, I would like to sketch the basic ideas of a relational perspective. Besides the works of Doreen Massey and Tim Ingold, the approach of relational sociology, especially by Christopher Powell, has shaped my thinking about relationality.[24]

On Relationality

Generally, a relational perspective shifts the focus from encounters between given entities towards the multiple relations involved in their production. This shift does not imply an understanding that everything is harmoniously connected with everything else, it rather turns our attention towards the multiple processes of relating and the different forms of relations that shape our fields of study in a particular way. What we study then are specific meshwork(s) or bundles of relations and the processes through which they emerged. Thus, following Powell, relations are conceptualized as processes.[25] As the example of the pastor's ongoing practices of relating and his moves in his fight show, relations could be personal, conceptual, material or sensuous and are by no means restricted to social relations of individuals or societal institutions. Not only human actors participate in processes of relating, but also non-human beings, ideas, objects, buildings, environments, which have agency insofar as they have the capacity to participate in a relation.[26] In M.'s

24    Ch. Powell, Radical Relationism: A Proposal, in: Ch. Powell and F. Dépelteau, Conceptualizing Relational Sociology: Ontological and Theoretical Issues, New York 2013, pp. 187-207. Just as much, my colleagues in the joint research programme "Africa multiple: Reconfiguring African Studies" at the University of Bayreuth have shaped my thinking about multiplicity and relationality.

25    Ibid., pp. 194-195.

26    The capacity of hon-humans to participate in relations is an open question in relational sociology, see F. Dépelteau, Relational Thinking in Sociology: Relevance, Concurrence and Dissonance, in: Id. (ed.), The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology, Cham 2018, pp. 3-33. In contrast, it is a central tenet of the approaches of New Materialism and Actor-Network-Theory, see B. Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, Oxford 2005; K. Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning, Durham 2007. Here relationality is understood as an ontological category. I am certainly not saying that relational approaches are exclusively about tracing the meaning-making activities of human

case, different human and non-human beings participated in relational practices and the meshwork that emerged: Witches, the Holy Spirit, God, Bishop Oyedepo, his Malagasy boss, his wife, house owners, absent family members including ancestors, and myself – but also ideas of Nigeria and global Christianity, the notion of warfare, the housing market, the word-of-faith theology of Kenneth Hagin, Malagasy traditions and landscapes, and effects of European mission and colonialism took part, as well as the contemporary Christian mainline churches (in need of revival), bodies, books, Ariary bills and coins, vacant houses and bottles of anointed oil.

Relations also have different properties depending on the observer's position, i.e. they might be more or less concrete, imagined, (im)material, embodied, brief or enduring. Relations can be present, past or potential, and thus open up future possibilities of relating. This feature connects nicely with Karl Schlögel's conception, mentioned in the introduction, of places incorporating the simultaneous existence of multiple historical times. Understanding relations as processes of relating or, as Ingold puts it, as lines and movements, points to the capacity of relations to span distances as well as times, from Madagascar to Nigeria, from the European mission of the nineteenth century to the US-American word-of-faith movement, from the Congregationalist missionary enterprise to contemporary Pentecostalism, from colony to post-colonial nation state.

With respect to place, both Doreen Massey and Tim Ingold have developed relational approaches.[27] Although they start from different backgrounds and pursue different objectives, they share important basic ideas. Massey and Ingold agree that we should study places not as given, container-like entities with fixed boundaries within which people live, but rather as constant processes of becoming.[28] Thus, the dynamic movement of relating and thereby producing places is central to both of their conceptions. In his review of Massey's book "For Space" (2005), Ingold writes:

> Both of us imagine a world of incessant movement and becoming, one that is never complete but continually under construction, woven from the countless lifelines of its manifold human and non-human constituents as they thread their ways through the tangle of relationships in which they are comprehensively enmeshed.[29]

The focus on movement and change makes clear that places "can be made durable but they cannot last,"[30] as they are not substances but only temporary products of changing relations. Ingold describes these movements as wayfaring and writes: "Places, then, are like knots, and the threads from which they are tied are the lines of wayfaring". These

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beings. However, I do not have the methodical training to study, for example, materials or non-human agency and therefore follow only M.'s practices.

27  D. Massey, Global Sense of Place; T. Ingold, Against Space.

28  D. Massey, Global Sense of Place: Massey criticises the rhetoric of time-space compression, favouring time and equating it to movement and progress, whereas place is equated with stasis and reaction, connected to notions of boundedness, fixity and straightforwardness, see p. 151 as well as the introduction of this special issue.

29  T. Ingold, Review: Doreen Massey: For Space, in: Journal of Historical Geography 32 (2006), pp. 891-893, at 891.

30  N. Thrift, Steps to an Ecology of Place, in: D. Massey, J. Allen and P. Sarre (eds.), Human Geography Today, Malden 1999, pp. 295-322, at 317. This does not deny that people may perceive places as static and fixed.

lines "become caught up with other lines in other places, as are threads in other knots. Together they make up what I have called the meshwork". [31] Places as knots of lived stories and experiences or bundles of relations and as components of meshwork(s), again participate in further relational processes and thus in the co-constitution of other places, ideas, objects and actors. As the multiple relations that produce a place always bring forth multiple other processes of relating, relationality questions the idea of place as a singular, discrete and given object of study, but rather shows that place cannot be other than multiple.[32]

Place then forms through spatio-temporal events and mirrors the complex, changing (power) relations it is made up of. The specificity of a place results from the particular configuration of relations at a specific moment in time, including those relations reaching beyond the physical locus.[33] In the same vein Ingold writes that human existence is not fundamentally place-bound, but place-binding. It is about the processes of relating or, in Ingold's words, of wayfaring, entwining lifelines, and thereby producing knots and meshwork(s) of intertwined trails along which life is lived.[34] For a relational study this means that relations are not simply analysed as connectors between given entities, but are themselves traced as experienced, lived practices. Thus, the study of place is not about decoding the many meanings attached to a given place or uncovering the social worlds constructed *in* it. It is rather about studying the processes of 'doing place', this is, the practices through which a place emerges, including imagining, embodying, expressing or envisioning, or, in Ingold's terms, dwelling and wayfaring. As shown above, these practices can involve different modes of relating, such as for instance support, cooperation, resistance, exclusion or denial.[35] Hence, thinking in relational processes is not about the denial of power, nor about an exclusive focus on harmonious connections and mixtures. On the contrary, it allows for a closer look at the specificity of relations and their (a)symmetries. This raises the question of what kinds of (power) relations are necessary to bind a place and to eventually produce the perceived or desired fixity of a place, that is, of a specific relational configuration.

## On Place-Binding Practices

Several ethnographic studies suggest that in the Malagasy highlands, where the town in question is located, a person is perceived as existing only in and through its relationships. These relations include, for example, living and deceased family members, the land of

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31 T. Ingold, Against Space, p. 149.

32 On multiplicity see for example G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, London 2015.

33 D. Massey, Global Sense of Place, p. 154. However, Massey concentrates attention on *social* relations, stating, "each place is the focus of a distinct a *mixture* of wider and more local social relations" (emphasis in original), p. 156.

34 T. Ingold, Against Space 2011, p. 148f.

35 In her book "For Space", Massey writes that the "throwntogetherness" of place also includes "the non-meetings-up, the disconnections and the relations not established, the exclusions." D. Massey, For Space, London 2005, p. 130.

the ancestors and the blessings they give.[36] Thus, to place somebody means to trace and construct his/her spatial, temporal, material and social relations. According to archaeologists/anthropologists Kus and Raharijaona, villages, tombs, and agricultural fields not only mark ongoing social affiliations but the histories of social groups charted "through trajectories of site occupation, abandonment, and relocation."[37] Thus, processes of the becoming of a place and of a person or group are co-constitutive. Maurice Bloch writes about the Merina in the highland of Madagascar: "People are thought of as descendants of the land as much as they are thought of as descendants of their ancestors".[38] A family tomb here represents, for example, the undivided, enduring, even eternal descent group; and with a tomb the descent group is "eternally merged with its land".[39] Bloch regards the ritual of turning the dead (*famadihana*) as a means to negate individuality, change of the social order and the everyday experience of discontinuity.[40] The ritual emphasises eternal relations that make up the continuing entity of the descent group. This construction of an ideal image of an eternal, unchanging order and of the timeless fixity of relations is a central aspect of many rituals, according to Bloch,[41] and I think it can be found in Pentecostalism, too. After numerous failures, pastor M. finally tried to establish eternal relations and to merge place, Pentecostals and Jesus by performing a ritual.

Central to Pentecostalism's relational thinking is the goal of convincing people to break the ties that bind them to "evil" places, traditions and persons, and to commit themselves to a new eternal covenant. To "make a complete break with the past"[42] thus means to overcome the demonic spells that reign over the believers' bodies, minds and living envi-

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36  This does not deny that persons are understood as individuals, too.

37  S. Kus and V. Raharijaona, Domestic Space and the Tenacity of Tradition Among Some Betsileo of Madagascar, in: S. Kent (ed.), Domestic Architecture and the Uses of Space: An Interdisciplinary Cross-Cultural Study, Cambridge 1990, pp. 21-33, at 22. To "occupy" a site includes, for example, to have a family tomb there. In contrast to the houses of the living, the tombs are made to endure; they signal the continuity of the descent group. See footnote 38.

38  M. Bloch, Death, Women and Power, in: Id. and J. Parry (eds.), Death and the Regeneration of Life, Cambridge 1992, pp. 211-230, at 211. See also M. Bloch, People into Places: Zafimaniry Concepts of Clarity, in: E. Hirsch and M. O'Hanlon (eds.), The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space, Oxford 1996, pp. 63-77. Here Bloch writes about the architectural efforts of Zafimaniry people to make houses places that remain, thereby also stabilizing and materialising family relations and fixing people to place. In this way, people and places merge, p. 71.

39  M. Bloch, Death, p. 219. In this image then, people do not make places but become part of them. With Ingold, I would argue that they bind themselves to the place and the place binds itself to them; thus, place and people co-constitute.

40  *Famadihana* or the turning of the dead is a ritual practised in the Malagasy highland. The extended family honours ancestors by taking the remains of the deceased out of the family tomb, rewrapping them with cloths and celebrating this event with the inhabitants of the land of their ancestors with music, dance and a communal meal, see M. Bloch, Placing the Dead: Tombs, Ancestral Villages, and Kinship Organization in Madagascar, London 1971.

41  M. Bloch, Death, p. 223f. Bloch speaks of rituals in contexts of traditional authority. Michael Lambek works in a different region of Madagascar but is also concerned with the relational being of the people he works with, the Sakalava, and their making of (or dealing with the relationality of) history, places and persons in ritual. M. Lambek, The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar, New York 2002.

42  B. Meyer, 'Make a Complete Break With the Past': Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse, in: Journal of Religion in Africa 28 (1998) 3, pp. 316-349.

ronments. In this sense, Pentecostals try to win and fix a place by cutting some relations and fixing others. This is also how religious studies scholar Sean McCloud describes the idea of spiritual warfare: as "attempts to fix the interstitial into position".[43] Interstitial places, he calls them spatial limbos, "in which [according to Pentecostals] the sins of history materialize in the forms of demons"[44], need a reformation through a remaking of the relations in and through which they are constituted.

Pastor M. failed at placing himself in the lifeworlds of the other inhabitants of the town because he could not participate in their relational webs. For him, these meshwork(s) were made up of relations to evil forces. His project, his role as a missionary and his practices to win the place for Jesus took shape together with his efforts to bind the place to himself, to the church and to Jesus. During my stay with the pastor and his wife, I participated in one of the performative practices they had decided on, based on their previous interactions and experiences. The pastor did not try to conquer the public sphere via loudspeakers, radio and other materializations of the church's presence, practices PCCs are known for. Instead, he opted for another way, which he called (in English) "blood spilling".[45] This is a ritual that he started to perform regularly on Saturday nights. It is about dispersing the blood of the Lamb of God / Jesus Christ in town in order to "win the place for Jesus", as the couple explained. Only four people participated in this nocturnal activity: the pastor, his wife, the director of the youth centre and a taxi driver, who was a member of another word-of-faith church in town. When I attended the ritual, the pastor and his wife prepared fourteen one- and-a-half-litre bottles of grenadine syrup diluted with water. The pastor "anointed" the liquid, as he said, that is, he consecrated it into the blood of the Lamb of God. Then, the pastor, his wife, the director of the youth centre and I got into the taxi to cruise around the town. While the taxi driver was taking us through the town's streets, the three poured the "blood" out of the open car windows and said prayers. They took turns sprinkling the blood and stopped pouring when there were people in the street.

In explaining this practice to me, the pastor referred to several passages in the bible. He mentioned Exodus 12:13, where the blood of the sacrificial Pesach lamb is said to protect the people of God (with bloodstains on the doors marking the houses to be protected). He also referred to Exodus 24:8, which is about the confirmation of the covenant: "And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words'." Moreover, the pastor brought up Revelation 12:11, in which the Devil fights against the angels in heaven: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their

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43    S. McCloud, Mapping the Spatial Limbos, p. 168.
44    Ibid.
45    Other pastors of Winners' Chapel in Madagascar called it "the sprinkling of blood" and did not perform it regularly.

testimony", and where finally (14) the lamb (Jesus Christ) stands jointly with God at the centre of New Jerusalem.[46]

According to the pastor, sprinkling blood in a Malagasy town allows him to relate to the inhabitants, and to pass over the covenant to them, as the blood stands for the relation between God and his people. The pastor, or rather the words that the Bible and the Holy Spirit have given him, and the blood of Jesus are meant to connect the town and God; the consecrated syrup makes Jesus present, binds the place to God/the Holy Ghost and the pastor to the local community: It is this process of relating the pastor, the blood, the streets of the town, its inhabitants and God that will break demonic spells and bring people to his church.

The pastor's way to "win the place for Jesus" was trying to dissolve unwanted relations and establish new ones. In the beginning, he had no specific idea of the town and the obstacles and enemies he would encounter. It was in the interactions that took place and the relationships he entered and experienced, that the pastor as a fighter, his practices, the inhabitants and the place emerged. In Ingold's words: "Here the meaning of the 'relation' has to be understood quite literally, not as a connection between pre-located entities but as a path traced through the terrain of lived experience".[47]

## 5. Conclusion

The core issue of a relational perspective seems very simple: Instead of taking objects of study for granted as discrete entities with a given substance, it focuses on the processes of relating in and through which these "entities" temporarily come into being. Such a perspective thus implies a rethinking of our "objects" of study – e.g. actors, groups, places or religious traditions – in relational terms. This rethinking enables us to overcome dichotomies; and this in turn requires us to transcend an exclusive focus on religion in the study of "religious" encounters and places, asking instead for a new look at lifeworlds, their relational production and the rooms of manoeuvre which the continuous and potential processes of relating offer.[48]

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46  Bible quotes from New King James Version: https://www.biblestudytools.com/nkjv/ (accessed 10 October 2018). In several YouTube videos Winners' Chapel pastors preach about the blood of sprinkling. Here the blood is sprinkled, for example, on the audience and frees them from demonic spells and curses. To sprinkle or apply the blood can involve protection, deliverance, healing, redemption and/or communion with God. See for example Bishop Oyedepo: Mystery of the Blood of Sprinkling, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-akKRjaT4jY (accessed 27 October 2018).

47  T. Ingold, Up, Across and Along, in: E. Näripea, V. Sarapik and J. Tomberg (eds.), Koht ja Paik / Place and Location: Studies in Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics V, Tallinn 2006, pp. 21-36, at 30. In his text, "here" refers to the topics of a story and the movement of /in storytelling. My focus is however on the broader notion of "doing" (i.e. performing, experiencing etc.), and not just on storytelling in the strict sense.

48  Similar to notions of meshwork and network, see also Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of *agencement* / assemblage as an experiment not to think in different hierarchical levels and discrete dualist entities but to think individual, society, agency, structure and event 'on one level'. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus.

In the study of religion, place/space and contemporary encounters are important topics. A growing number of works focus on religious diversity in public spheres and urban spaces, but also, for example, on pilgrimages and sacred sites. Frequently, "religious space" is either presented phenomenologically as a clearly located and bounded room for spiritual experience or it is conceptualized in constructivist manner as an arena for contestations and/or negotiations of belonging, identity, ownership and representation.[49] Either way, many of these studies work with dichotomies of sacred/profane or religious/secular and focus on the religious, e.g. the diverse religious traditions meeting in a given space or the delineations of the sacred by different religious groups using the same sites etc. Kim Knott, a central proponent of the spatial turn in the study of religion, draws inspiration from Massey's relational and dynamic concept of space as a context in which places are set, i.e. as "a wider space of stretched-out social relations".[50] The "interconnectedness of events and [the] relational nature of the persons, objects, and places that constitute space"[51] led her to go beyond a study of the religious, and instead to focus on religious-secular relations and the location of religion in a wider (non-religious) context. For me, the acknowledgement of relationality and the shift of focus away from discrete entities towards the processes through which relational configurations come into being, likewise inevitably leads to an opening of our fields in the study of religion. It leads to the dissolution of a "religious field" or of "religion" as a separate domain, because situations and experiences are always made up of multiple relations, not only of those in which "religious" groups, ideas, places, or objects participate. Opting for a relational epistemology means that the field of study is not defined by religion (and a distinct logic of the field), but rather delineated by relations. It invites us to study lifeworlds instead of an autonomous religious field.

The notion of lifeworld allows for grasping lives at specific historical junctures, where dynamic practices of relating form ever-changing meshwork(s) of relations, through which people constitute, and experience, embody, interpret and make the world.[52] This notion includes subjective and intersubjective relationships that open or close rooms for manoeuvre for further practices of relating. It comprises textures of habits, rituals, affect and knowledge, but also the multiple relations of other agencies as, for example objects, ideas, environments, spirits or other human beings beyond the subjective reach. Processes of relating are multiple and continuous. They may span different temporal and spatial scales. Every field of study is thus made up of multiple meshworks and is there-

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49   Chidester summarizes the approaches of the first thread as "poetics of religious space" and the second as "politics of religious space." D. Chidester, Space, in: M. Stausberg and S. Engler (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion, Oxford 2016, pp. 329-339, at 330. See also K. Knott, Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion, in: Religion and Society: Advances in Research 1 (2010), pp. 29-43, see especially 31-35. Most relational approaches are constructivist, too; however, they do not focus on the finished constructions but on the processes of their coming into being.

50   K. Knott, The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis, Durham 2013 [2005], p. 32. Knott understands space as means, outcome and medium of social and cultural activity, p. 34.

51   Ibid., p. 23, insertion E.S.

52   See E. Spies, Being in Relation.

fore in principle boundless. In ethnographic (and other) research, we need to cut the relational meshwork(s)[53] and choose a cut-out from which to start – a step which makes us inextricably part of our relational field of study, by bringing to an end some relations, and initiating new ones. This makes clear that knowledge production is relational, too. This is not to pretend that such a perspective is able to decolonize knowledge production and overcome power asymmetries. However, acknowledging epistemic relationality is a step towards overcoming dichotomies like the one between concrete local knowledge, which we encounter in our fields of research, and abstract knowledge, which we supposedly produce in academic space.[54] Focusing on relational lifeworlds and, thus, the co-constitution of knowledge means that we have to consider multiple participants in academic knowledge production as well.

Finally, the notion of relational lifeworlds helps to overcome a space / place-dichotomy, which understands space as lifeless and abstract while place appears concrete and tangible. Although Massey reconceptualises space as open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming,[55] I see no need for this concept if we speak of relational lifeworlds, ultimately agreeing with Ingold: "To my mind the world is a world, not space".[56]

53    See M. Strathern, Cutting the Network, in: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 2 (1996) 3, pp. 517-535. According to Strathern, relating is always connected to cutting, as relations connect and divide at the same time. It is this process of cutting that she thinks researchers should focus on. I think this is similar to my interest in the relational processes that are necessary to produce the (perceived) fixity of meshworks (a religious tradition, a place, a person). I prefer Ingold's notion of meshwork to network, because the latter seems to foreground the knots / nodes and less the experienced processes and movements. Thus, "network" focuses on results and less on the "trails along which life is lived." T. Ingold, Against Space 2011, p. 148f. For relational research see also M. Desmond, Relational Ethnography, in: Theory and Society 43 (2014), pp. 547-579.
54    See D. Chidester, Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion, Chicago 2014, on the constitution of knowledge (concepts and theories) in religious studies in and through processes of mediation.
55    D. Massey, For Space, p. 59.
56    T. Ingold, Review, p. 892.