Both in the United States and in the countries of the European Union, immigration continues to be a polarizing issue. Despite some efforts to create new limits and to shape the demographics of immigrant inflows, the mechanisms of globalization have made continued immigration an undeniable part of modern social landscapes.

In planning to research the lives of immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa in Porto, Portugal, I began with the observation that in the United States, many immigrant groups have their own religious institutions. In my own neighborhoods, both in California and Texas, one can find both Protestant and Catholic congregations worshipping in Korean, Mandarin, Amharic, Tamil, Spanish, and, of course, Portuguese, among many others. I began to wonder if Africans in Portugal had formed their own congregations, and if such congregations would be formed around a shared language, a common national origin, or collective experiences of being African in a city with relatively few African immigrants. As a research site, Porto, Portugal made this question more intriguing, because the city has no African neighborhoods to speak of, and so any communities of immigrants would have to be formed around something other than geography. Could a church serve the same role as a neighborhood in creating networks of support and interconnectedness?

This research is therefore an investigation of the relationships between worshippers, their immigrant communities, their spiritual lives, and their shifting identities. Equally important are the connections of such relationships to a broader Portuguese social ethos, and how the variables of religious affiliation, race, and Portuguese national histories and mythologies have affected the immigrant experiences of Catholics, Protestants and Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately, this research engages with larger issues of immigration, reflecting on the impact of religious practice on the processes of assimilation, integration, and isolation in immigrant communities and their host societies.

I conducted my research in Porto, Portugal between September 2007 and June 2008. I found that the immigrant religious communities that I was searching for did exist, but were almost completely unperceived by the Portuenses with whom I initially spoke. One immigrant, the head of the Espaço Moçambique café and community center, pointed me towards a church; questioning of other immigrants led me to Porto's...
mosque. And serendipity plus attentiveness led me to others—for example, a flier for a tiny evangelical church, found on a bench at my daughter’s Portuguese school, was illustrated with a grainy picture of an African-looking preacher. A visit to a service confirmed that this was an immigrant church. Eventually, I identified and investigated several communities of faith with significant African presence. These were:

- The Igreja Paróquial de Santo António das Antas, which has become host to a monthly Missa com e por África (a mass “with and for Africa”) organized by Padre António Bacelar in close collaboration with African university students; this service is a venue for the performance of Christian folksongs from the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African) countries, and gives African Catholics in Porto a place to get together and meet each other, particularly so at the lunch usually held after mass.

- Porto’s Mesquita (mosque) Hazrat Bilal has, at Friday prayers, by far the greatest number of Africans at any religious service in Porto. In a congregation of perhaps 200 Muslim men, almost half are from sub-Saharan Africa, with many of the rest coming from North Africa. The Imam himself is from the PALOP nation of Guinea Bissau, and many of his assistants who run the day-to-day preparations and tidying at the mosque are also African.

- The Igreja Evangélica Nova Criação (“Evangelical Church of the New Creation”) is a local, storefront Protestant church, operated by pastors from Nigeria and Ghana, with seven services a week in Portuguese and one in English. Nova Criação is small, unadorned, and improvisational; a typical service consists of preaching, prayer, group Bible reading, and songs, these latter sung by one member of the congregation, accompanied by enthusiastic drumming by the tween-aged son of the pastor. The Lusofone congregation at Nova Criação is majority African, while the English-speaking congregation is overwhelmingly African, from Nigeria and Ghana.

- The Igreja Luso-Africana dos Metodistas no Porto (the “Luso-African Methodist Church) is another humble storefront operation, founded by an Angolan pastor and his wife and co-pastor. The Igreja Luso-Africana features spirited preaching, hymns from the Angolan Methodist hymnal (with lyrics in Portuguese or Kikongo), and a lively choir that serves as the principal vehicle for the church’s evangelical mission by representing it at events both ecumenical and secular. The congregation at the Igreja is mostly Angolan, but other Lusofone Africans and even some White Portuguese attend as well.

Each of these congregations has yielded individuals, both from clergy and flock, who are willing and often enthusiastic to share information about their lives as immigrants and their faith through interviews and “convivio.” I also participated in a pilgrimage to Fatima with African students from the Antas congregation, marched in the annual parade of university students, the cortejo, with seminarians from Ghana and Kenya and their Portuguese colleagues, and attended a Metodista baptism in a stream on the northern outskirts of Porto.
Interestingly, I have observed many barriers that keep the average White Portuguese person from coming to know, personally and with a sense of empathy, the African immigrants who live in this city. At Antas, where White Portuguese make up the greater part of the congregation even for the monthly "African" mass, Catholic African immigrants gain some visibility, for better or for worse. But while the members of the regular congregation can see that more Africans live in Porto than they may have realized, they do not seem to move closer to understanding the lives of these immigrants, and few participate in shared meals or conversation with them. Meanwhile, other White Portuguese seem entirely unaware of the immigrant communities in their midst. This phenomenon of invisibility is a subject for greater analysis—I am examining the reasons that the Portuguese might not see immigrants, or might not want to see immigrants, as well as the reasons that immigrants might themselves choose to remain relatively invisible in their host country.

There are many points at which I have observed Porto’s African immigrant communities remaining invisible even to African immigrants themselves. More frequently, though, immigrants met with one another in various settings. Religion obviously provided one such context, but so too did some of Porto’s older centros comerciais, shopping centers that often became informal community centers, with African restaurants, hair stylists, and grocery stores in close proximity. And with greater and greater frequency, the movers and shakers of Porto’s African communities are organizing events such as the three-day FestÁfrica, which showcased African arts, cultures, and concerns in the Mercado Ferreira Borges, in the shadow of Henry the Navigator’s statue.

While Kizomba clubs, African restaurants, and special events also give Porto’s African communities opportunities to come together, for a great many Africans in Porto the churches or mosque continue to be the primary locations for meeting, exchanging ideas, and generally identifying with common experiences. Each of these places forms a community with its own distinctive characteristics, and its own patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The Missa Africana at Antas makes Africans a part of the service, but not necessarily a part of the congregation. The Luso-African Methodist Church welcomes Africans from many countries, and Portuguese as well, but hymns in Kikongo identify the congregation as still predominantly Angolan, and even more specifically Bakongo (northern Angolan). The Church of the New Creation has a Lusofone congregation with Africans, Portuguese and others worshipping together, and this congregation is almost completely separate from the church’s all-African English-speaking congregation.
Meanwhile, the mosque brings Muslim men from Sub-Saharan Africa together with Arabs from North Africa and the Middle East to pray in general unity. Each congregation creates a new community for immigrants in Porto, and provides them with spiritual support and other benefits of being united in common experience. On the other hand, none of these congregations serves to facilitate greater integration into the Portuguese mainstream to any significant extent.

I am now in the process of writing my dissertation based upon this fieldwork, to be submitted in May of 2010. In addition to further discussion of invisibility, identity formation, immigrant experiences, and the nature of religious community, I will examine further the implications that the Portuguese self-identity holds for those seeking to fit in; I look to history books, canonical literature, tourist materials, and popular culture to identify what it means to be “Portuguese.” Globalization continues to transform the demographic landscapes of Europe, America, and, indeed, the entire world. The city of Porto has only recently begun to experience a broader diversity, not just of race and cultures but also of religions, and it is thus fascinating to observe the ways that faith informs the lives and experiences of Porto’s citizens and immigrants.

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“At Lisboa’s Rossio train station, thirteen tiled panels by Lima de Freitas depict iconic figures from Portuguese myth, history and literature. Can immigrants from the former colonies identify with Vieira’s Quinto Imperio?"