

Refugee Hosts

Local Community Experiences of Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey



Contemplating the impact of restrictions on the religious life of ethnic minority and migrant communities during the Covid-19 pandemic

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The global lockdown has had a significant impact on the ability of religious communities to gather and offer support in times of stress and illness. In this post Dr Romina Istratii draws on her research conducted with Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Täwahädo adherents in Northern Ethiopia and London to describe the role of religious communities and how these roles, traditions and practices can take on an increasingly significant role for migrants in the UK. In particular, the pastoral role of the church in providing solace and comfort in times of increased stress and illness, the reliance on church activities for social interaction and activities, the role of the church in mediating domestic abuse, and the ability of church members to seek spiritual or psychological relief. Although activities such as prayer and weekly bible studies continue on-line, it is the pastoral and support roles of the church, argues Istratii, which are most affected by the global lockdown, increasing stress and risk for migrants in the UK.

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Contemplating the impact of restrictions on the religious life of ethnic minority and migrant communities during the Covid-19 pandemic

by Dr Romina Istratii, SOAS University of London

Introduction

Extensive concerns have been raised about the disproportionate effects (<https://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/369/bmj.m1548.full.pdf>), of the outbreak of Covid-19 on ethnic minorities in the UK, especially mediated through health risks and income loss (https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Are-some-ethnic-groups-more-vulnerable-to-COVID-19-than-others-V2-IFS-Briefing-Note.pdf?utm_source=The%20King%27s%20Fund%20newsletters%20%28main%20account%29&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11513246_NEWSL_HMP%202020-05-05&dm_i=21A8,6UROE,L7VLN3,RILX6,1#page=1). However, less attention has been paid to the impact of the shutdown through restrictions on the religious life of ethnic minority and migrant communities. The effects of religious experience are diverse and depend on various parameters, including the cultural fabric that individuals are socialised in, theological and exegetical specificities and individual personality characteristics. As states adopt strategies to respond to the crisis, the epistemological, social and spiritual influence of religious beliefs should be carefully considered for all communities, but especially irregular migrants who may face additional barriers (<https://academic.oup.com/fampra/article-pdf/23/3/325/1285474/cmi113.pdf>) in accessing health services and may find a refuge in religious community life. Religious gatherings, like other social gatherings, could have provided an early conduit for virus spread, but they also serve important roles that need to be acknowledged and could be leveraged in addressing the pandemic's consequences.

To ground the current discussions ethnographically, I draw on research I previously conducted with Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox *Täwahädo* adherents in London as part of a long-term study (<https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/30986>) in Northern Ethiopia investigating conjugal abuse realities and attitudes in relation to the local religio-cultural system. In London, I participated in the services of two Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahädo* Churches frequented also by Eritreans, conducting numerous interviews with women, men and clergy.[1]

The importance of religious life amongst members of Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in London

My interlocutors in London had diverse profiles and came from different walks of life. Most had been in the UK for many years. Some had initially been refugees unable to work until their documentation was formalised. While some were able to pursue postgraduate education, others tried to re-train in new professions (e.g. care worker, technician) to make a living, and numerous took on low-skilled, insecure jobs to survive.

During the months that I immersed myself in the community (September-November 2016) the churches were full. The centrality of religious life in the migrant community reflects in part the dominant role of the Orthodox *Täwahädo* faith in migrants' home communities. For example, in the northernmost region of Ethiopia, participating in church services is an indisputable part of daily activity and folklore culture for both children and adults. After church services, attendants are offered the staple local bread (*'angära*), while clergy teach or resolve other community issues. Priests are

central to everyday life and most individuals have a spiritual father throughout their adult lives, whom they consult regularly. Priests are often approached first when family issues arise or in the case of an illness or death.[ii]

My ethnographic activities in London suggested that many of these norms continue among the migrant population, albeit with differences. As in Northern Ethiopia, the sacrament of the Holy Communion (*Q^warban*) was perceived by my interlocutors to provide 'spiritual food' for those participating, while the clergy seemed to have an important role in teaching and offering pastoral advice. Church services also offered the opportunity for the community to meet each other and to socialize. Food was typically served after each liturgy and people gathered in pairs or small groups to share their news. After church activities, it was not unusual for attendants to visit a member's home to hold the traditional coffee ceremony. Church services were complemented with weekly bible study sessions and chorus and dance practices (*māzmur* and *wäräb*). Group excursions organised by the churches were also frequent – for example to celebrate the annual festival of finding the Cross (*Mäsqäl*) or St. Stephen's day (*Qadus Stäfanos*). Churches also reported supporting the homeless and the poor with alms collection and cooking meals.

Many people had discovered a newly-found sense of faithfulness as migrants, building strong relationships with clergy that they did not have at home. A young man confided that while in Ethiopia he had not felt the need to attend church because the entire society and culture around him had been religious, in the UK the mainstream secular culture led him to reconnect with the Church. Similarly, one female interlocutor reported that back home she did not have a spiritual father, but she had found one in the UK after she started attending church more often. Others reported that they travelled long distances to see a priest in order to hold the Sacrament of Confession (*Nəsaha*).

The influence of religious beliefs, as comprehended within folklore tradition, on people's understandings of human behaviour and illnesses was also observed. More than a few interlocutors were facing mental or physical problems that they could not explain or treat medically, which they associated often with the work of Satan, magic or sorcery. Coming to church did not necessarily treat these issues, but it reportedly provided some relief and could further motivate church attendance. While the relationship between spirituality and mental health is a complex one, similar testimonies have been reported (<https://healthtalk.org/mental-health-ethnic-minority-experiences/the-role-of-faith-spirituality-religion-for-people-with-mental-health-problems>) for other ethnic minority groups.

COVID-19 restrictions and impacts on the life of the community

With the current shutdown, religious practice has been radically restricted as advised, although this has not hindered the continuation of church life. Prayers have been moved online and weekly bible study continues via Zoom. Platforms such as WhatsApp enable church members to communicate regularly, including for choir practices. Still, with religious spaces being closed, community members have fewer occasions to socialise or to seek psychological or spiritual relief. A heightened degree of isolation for some of the community members is anticipated, which might combine with stresses caused by financial precariousness. Migrant populations with family in Eritrea must also feel additional anxiety worrying about the wellbeing of their relatives. Members of the Eritrean community have informed me of numerous deaths in the community and the agony experienced due to being unable to follow the traditional mourning practices. It is not unlikely that many are currently agonising over the possibility of dying while being away from home and without proper burial services.

Important implications could also exist for those facing mental health problems or other issues, including family problems, divorce or separations and intimate partner abuse, all of which were reported frequently during my research both in the host and home communities. Some of my interviews with women suggested that domestic violence was present and not generally

communicated. Various factors could discourage seeking support, including a lack of knowledge of available support systems and financial dependence on men, especially if they had children. It is not clear what the on-going lockdown could mean for these women and their children, but further alienation from the community in the current climate could have important consequences. In Northern Ethiopia, it was a norm for abused women to keep their abuse a secret, but they at least often invited family, elders or clergy to mediate what they presented as lesser family problems. With the current shutdown, even these traditional mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms would be restricted, which calls urgent attention to the situation of possible victims.

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[i] While this piece refers to Orthodox *Tāwahādo* adherents, the Eritrean and Ethiopian communities include Muslims and adherent of other faiths.

[ii] While Eritrea is a distinct case study, many of these norms would not be unfamiliar among the Orthodox *Tāwahādo* population, especially on the other side of the border.

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Akay Erturk, S. (2020) [The effects of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Turkey](https://southernresponses.org/2020/04/24/the-effects-of-covid-19-on-syrian-refugees-in-turkey/) (<https://southernresponses.org/2020/04/24/the-effects-of-covid-19-on-syrian-refugees-in-turkey/>).

Diab, J. (2020) [Syrian Refugees in Lebanon amid Confinement, Health Scares and Escalating Needs](https://refugeehosts.org/2020/04/09/syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-amid-confinement-health-scares-and-escalating-needs/) (<https://refugeehosts.org/2020/04/09/syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-amid-confinement-health-scares-and-escalating-needs/>).

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2020) [Refugee-led local responses in the time of Covid-19: Preliminary reflections from North Lebanon](https://refugeehosts.org/2020/04/03/refugee-led-local-responses-in-the-time-of-covid-19-preliminary-reflections-from-north-lebanon/) (<https://refugeehosts.org/2020/04/03/refugee-led-local-responses-in-the-time-of-covid-19-preliminary-reflections-from-north-lebanon/>).

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2017) [Refugee-refugee solidarity in death and dying](https://refugeehosts.org/2017/05/23/refugee-refugee-solidarity-in-death-and-dying/) (<https://refugeehosts.org/2017/05/23/refugee-refugee-solidarity-in-death-and-dying/>).

Goodwin, E. (2019) [Engaging with religion at the local level for Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-Being following humanitarian crises](https://refugeehosts.org/2019/03/15/engaging-with-religion-at-the-local-level-for-mental-health-and-psychosocial-well-being-following-humanitarian-crises/) (<https://refugeehosts.org/2019/03/15/engaging-with-religion-at-the-local-level-for-mental-health-and-psychosocial-well-being-following-humanitarian-crises/>).

Maqusi, S. (2020) [‘The displacement virus is much stronger than the coronavirus’: Reflections from Burj el-Barajneh and Baqa’a Camps in Lebanon and Jordan](https://refugeehosts.org/2020/05/12/the-displacement-virus-is-much-stronger-than-the-coronavirus-reflections-from-burj-el-barajneh-and-baqaa-camps-in-lebanon-and-jordan/) (<https://refugeehosts.org/2020/05/12/the-displacement-virus-is-much-stronger-than-the-coronavirus-reflections-from-burj-el-barajneh-and-baqaa-camps-in-lebanon-and-jordan/>).

Featured image: Celebration of the festival of the finding of the Cross in Stevenage. (c) R. Istratii, 2016