An interdisciplinary workshop organised by Afe Adogame and Cordula Weiskoppel at Iwalewa House, Bayreuth University, 14-16 February 2003, sought to investigate the importance of religion to the lives of African migrants. Historians of religion, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and other specialists debated the somewhat neglected topic of the interplay between religion and migration. Incorporating case studies and methodological reflections, the workshop provided an opportunity to look beyond African migrants as vulnerable and unstable. The gathering also paid attention to gender dynamics within migrant communities and during the workshop itself.

Christoph Bochinger gave the introductory presentation, suggesting that the theme led one to question whether religion itself is sometimes a motive for migration. He observed that religion might play an important function in developing a sense of community amongst migrants. It was also necessary to consider whether new types of religious community emerged in the diaspora. Ulrich Berner debunked the popular notion that religion and migration is a novel theme. His paper, ‘Mission and Migration in the Roman Empire’, utilised historical data to suggest that ‘mission’ is not the only vehicle for the spread of religion across different geographical locations. Religion is also carried over to new locations through migration, transportation, diffusion and other processes. Berner demonstrated the importance of historical research and how contemporary developments may be better understood by tracing patterns across the various historical epochs.

In the contemporary period, the Egyptian Coptic diaspora in Germany has experienced cultural vitality. Fouad Ibrahim warned against the application of simplistic concepts like surrender and defeat, and proposed employing notions like resistance, selection, appropriation, expansion
and syncretisation to help understand the experiences of this group. Osman Mohammed Osman described the dispersion of the Sudanese Republican Brothers, outlining their appropriation of contemporary media technologies to publicise their ideology. He showed how persecution on religious and political grounds has led to expansion by migration, particularly to Western Europe and the United States of America. Asonzeh Ukah highlighted the expansion of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria, highlighting the centrality of young, mobile university graduates to the rapid growth of this Pentecostal church in the 1990s. Ukah attributed the growth of the church in Britain and the USA to migration and mission.

Frieder Ludwig drew attention to the role of women in the expansion of the Cherubim and Seraphim Churches in Great Britain and the USA. He observed patterns of continuity and change in religious expression and organisation between the churches in Nigeria and those in the diaspora. He acknowledged that, through migration, African churches have been brought into new networks and under new influences. While the Cherubim and Seraphim Churches in Nigeria tend to be strict doctrinally, those in the diaspora are more ecumenical. However, an emerging question is whether host communities in Europe and North America are willing to accommodate the religious beliefs and practices of migrant communities. For example, what is the impact of global images of Islam as a militant and intolerant religion on local debates? Toumas Martikeinen’s paper on the controversy surrounding efforts by Sunni Muslims and Vietnamese Buddhists to put up religious buildings in Turku, Finland, explored this theme. He showed how residents utilised global images of Islam as a religion that supported international terrorism and oppressed women to resist the building of a mosque by Sunni Muslims. The planned Buddhist retreat centre was also resisted on the grounds that Buddhism was a ‘foreign’ religion. He observed that the interplay between the global and the local, as well as practical and symbolic matters, were important issues in analysing the construction of religious buildings by ethnic minorities.

Munzoul Assal maintained that Islam was an important resource in the lives of Somali and Sudanese migrants to Norway. He described how migration had led to a heightened sense of religiosity amongst some migrants. Boris Nieswand highlighted the paradox of migration amongst Ghanaians in Berlin. He showed how most migrants undertook menial tasks in order to improve their social status back home. Benjamin Simon analysed the status of preaching amongst African Instituted/Initiated/Indigenous Churches in Germany, noting the role of religion in strength-
ening the sense of community. Similarly, Shlomit Kanari examined the central role of music in the lives of African migrants in Israel.

Galia Sabar’s paper, ‘The Ultimate Other: Black African Christians in the White Jewish State’, noted the multiple challenges that most African migrants face in Israel. These include being black in a white society, being illegal in a legal system, being Christian in a Jewish state and being Pentecostal in the Holy Land. She reviewed the political, economic, social and religious functions of the churches. Sabar also highlighted how African Christians adapted their religious beliefs and practices in the new environment, including utilising Saturday as the day of worship for most groups.

In case the centrality of religion in the lives of migrants could be overstated, some papers sought to challenge the conventional wisdom. Jim Spickard questioned the dominant assumption that immigrants to the USA took over the model of congregationalism for their religious organisation. He drew attention to the importance of private devotions in homes within new Japanese religions in the USA and religions derived from Africa. Bettina Conrad discussed the largely secular nature of the Eritrean diaspora. She concluded that religious life was virtually suspended during the revolution, with the socialist ideology playing a dominant role. Spickard and Conrad helped to put the status of organised religion in the lives of migrants into its proper perspective.

Theoretical and methodological papers were also presented. Ezra Chitando revisited the insider/outsider problem in research, illustrating how the tenuous status of most migrants magnified it. He argued that some migrant communities thrive on closure, making it difficult for ‘outsiders’ to access them. Afe Adogame used his personal experience as an African researching amongst African Christians in the diaspora to highlight the shifting boundaries of being ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. He maintained that insights from the phenomenological/hermeneutical tradition were useful in negotiating ‘roadblocks’ in research. Cordula Weiskoppel discussed her research into the German-Sudanese Sufi Brotherhood and concluded that factors like gender, nationality, language and religious beliefs had to be considered. Gabriel Cappai summarised the debate, acknowledging the need for further reflections concerning the generation of knowledge of migrant communities.

While the workshop was a major success, its case studies highlighting useful new material, the concept of diaspora remains as nebulous and contested as it has always been. The scholarly community eagerly awaits the planned publication of the proceedings, which will offer new perspectives on the study of African religions.