How pilgrimage souvenirs turn into religious remittances and powerful medicine

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Introduction

Religious travelling and souvenir shopping are interrelated movements: pilgrims travel to sacred sites where they shop for site-specific things that are brought back home to offer as precious gifts to close relatives and friends. While investigating the Marian pilgrimages of Catholic migrant women from West and Central Africa who now live in Paris, we found that many of them had become experts in souvenir shopping and gift giving. In the fall of 2015, we met the 55-year-old Congolese woman Emmanuelle in her Parisian residence. She used to make regular pilgrimages to different Marian sites across Europe and to Marian sanctuaries in Paris. She told us that she spends easily half of her pilgrimage time and a third of her travel budget on the acquisition of souvenirs like Marian statues, candles, rosaries, bottles filled with holy water and house decorations. Her apartment was transformed into a chapel-like place, the walls and cabinets decorated with images of Mary and other Catholic saints. The souvenirs were not there for decoration, but for protection. By intensifying and expanding her devotion and souvenir shopping (exploring new pilgrimage sites, learning about more rituals and discovering new souvenirs), she gradually assumed the position of Mary’s intermediary, transferring her protective power to others, in both her Parisian environment and her homeland. She uses her stock of holy water to bless visitors, friends and relatives, and sends her supply of hundreds of small and transportable souvenirs as gifts to relatives and parishes back home in Congo, to protect and heal them.
Emmanuelle shares these activities with her African sisters (relatives and friends) in Paris and with the larger group of Catholic African migrant women whom we interviewed. These women are middle-aged, have West and Central African backgrounds (coming from Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Senegal) and migrated to France for reasons of marriage, education or medical treatment. Being raised as Catholics in postcolonial francophone Africa, they share their devotion to Mary as well as an understanding of religion as a protective healing strategy to combat misfortune and evil forces. In this chapter, we take Emmanuelle as the protagonist and continue listening to her story in order to explore how, in processes of travelling and connecting, cheap mass-produced pilgrimage souvenirs get new meanings and alternative uses. Exploring the narrative journeys of pilgrimage souvenirs, we will show that these souvenirs start their social life at the souvenir market as commodities of little economic value, and are then set in motion by female devotees who change the value of these little things by imbuing them with divine power and giving them symbolic value. Passing through the case of Emmanuelle, we explore the conditions under which the souvenirs ‘circulate in specific cultural and historical milieus’ (Appadurai 1986, 4). We follow the things-in-motion in order to understand what meanings are reinscribed in their forms, uses and trajectories. By ‘thinking through the things’, this study supplements the limited knowledge, noted by Hillary Kaell (2012), about why and to whom women give souvenirs.

Women’s gifts, as Aafke Komter states (2005, 77), ‘are not exclusively friendly acts, springing from sympathy or love, but may also be vehicles to exercise power’. Power indeed matters a great deal in women’s souvenir gift giving, not only in their relationships with the recipients of their gifts, but also in their relationship with the divine world. Kaell similarly argues that women, by imbuing pilgrimage souvenirs with divine presence, create powerful tools for asserting ‘soft’ authority at home (2012, 134). We continue to observe the aspect of power in women’s gift giving by studying how women tap into Mary’s power and subsequently exercise and receive power by donating and sending pilgrimage souvenirs. What we add to Kaell’s analysis is the dimension of migration and transnational kin networks.

When we noticed that the pilgrimage souvenirs crossed large distances, not only across Europe but also between continents, thereby connecting the female senders with their homeland and the relatives living there, we decided to look at them from the perspective of remittances. Consistently with Lisa Cliggett’s (2005) study on Zambian ‘gift remittances’, we distance ourselves from the predominantly economic approach to remittances in migration debates. We rather stress the social dimension of transnational gift giving, the reciprocity that is involved and
the symbolic values attached to the pilgrimage souvenirs by both senders and recipients. Leaving behind the exclusively monetary approach to remittances, we aim to find out what use the sending of small, cheap and mass-produced souvenirs can be to recipients who are often supposed to be primarily in need of money and consumer goods.

By studying the social and symbolic dimensions of remittances, we aim to make a valuable contribution, as, to date, religion has hardly been considered in the debate on remittances (Dannecker 2015). Our study deliberately focuses on the importance of religion, not only to the senders but also to the recipients, and shows that religion contributes much to the shaping of material connectivities. The pilgrimage souvenirs appear to connect in different ways, corresponding with various stages in women’s connecting work. As commodities on the souvenir market, they are bought and prayed upon to establish *transcendental connections between the migrants and the spiritual world*, in particular Saint Mary. As precious gifts, imbued with Mary’s power, they are donated to African migrant women in the metropolis to establish *connections within the community of fellow travellers and Marian devotees*. And finally, as religious remittances, the pilgrimage souvenirs establish *transnational connections between the migrants in Europe and their African homelands*.

Central questions in our analysis of the pilgrimage souvenirs were: which pilgrimage souvenirs are bought to be sent back home, what new meanings are attached to them along their trajectories and what are the effects on both senders and recipients in terms of power? Before we go back to Emmanuelle’s story, we turn to the wider group of African migrant women we studied. We then present how our study responds to the existing literature on gift giving and remittances, and how we combine the different insights to understand the power in women’s gift giving. On the basis of Emmanuelle’s experience, we will develop our argument that pilgrimage souvenirs are set in motion as religious remittances and become powerful medicine through which migrant women heal and protect themselves and their relatives in a transnational network.

**A specific group of African Catholic migrant women in Europe**

The focus in this chapter is on women, as they were the main actors at the pilgrimage sites we studied; the few men we met there pointed to their wives as the experts whom they followed on their journey. Women were also the ones devoted to the souvenir shopping; their husbands, if present, patiently waited for them in an outdoor café. Emmanuelle
straightforwardly said: ‘Only women do the shopping; I’ve never seen one single man making this sacrifice.’ Gender clearly plays a role in these pilgrimage activities, because the travelling, shopping and gift giving are exclusively done by women (see also Kaell 2012; Komter 2005; Miller 1998).

When, in the course of our analysis, the special relevance of the acquiring and sending of pilgrimage souvenirs became clear, we selected Emmanuelle for our case study in 2015. Emmanuelle’s religious practices are emblematic of the wider group of Catholic migrant women that we studied: all travel frequently to Marian sites across Europe and share with each other information, souvenirs and stories, thus expanding their social-religious network along the way. The sites which Emmanuelle visits are crucial gathering points for the women who participated in the research (see also Notermans 2012). Emmanuelle was followed during three pilgrimages to San Damiano, which, together with the visits at her Parisian home, resulted in a particular intimacy with her. This greatly facilitated informal communication and offered the opportunity to compare verbal accounts with observed practices.

Emmanuelle may be considered representative of a specific group within the wider category of African migrants in Paris: female, middle-aged, middle-class, educated migrant mothers having French citizenship and travelling along the routes of an extended network of Marian sites. The Marian sites most frequently visited by them are Lourdes (southern France), Fatima (Portugal) and San Damiano (Italy), but Banneux and Beauroaing (Belgium), and Lisieux and Montligeon (northern France) are also favourite destinations. Women’s Wanderlust comes from profound feelings of being disconnected. Having one’s family around is not a matter of course in the metropolis, which contrasts sharply with social life in the communities of origin. Conjugal relationships often lack confidentiality and (spatial and emotional) intimacy, while relationships with (especially) maternal kin are vital for their security and wellbeing: having one’s kin around makes women feel safe, strong and respected. The loneliness in Paris is due to the fact that close relatives either stayed behind in their homelands or settled in other parts of the Parisian metropolis, France or Europe, while conjugal relationships do not grow close and intimate in the diaspora. Besides the threat of loneliness caused by absence of relatives, women may also experience threats coming from relatives in their homeland. Not all relatives support migrants in their migration endeavours; some express jealousy or make heavy demands on the migrants’ monetary remittances.

The different threats that women face in Paris explain why they look so eagerly for ways to protect themselves. They also create new families
by sharing pilgrimage activities and Marian devotion with other Catholic African migrant women in the Parisian diaspora (see Notermans, Turolla and Jansen 2016). Missing the crucial figure of their mother to turn to for solace, they take refuge in powerful Mary, who herself is considered a (transnational) mother who never abandons her children around the world. To merit Mary’s protection, the women in our study developed such an intense programme of religious travel that their mobility became a kind of lifestyle, vital in framing their new lives. ‘I’m so in love with Mary,’ Emmanuelle said when she expressed her happiness at leaving her apartment with some cash in her pocket to spend in the souvenir shop adjoining the chapel of Rue du Bac in Paris.

**Gift giving and remittances united in religious remittances**

Since the classic *Essai sur le don* by Marcel Mauss (1923–4), the concept of ‘gift’ has been prominent in anthropological theories of exchange. The pilgrimage souvenirs are characterised by the main qualities of ‘gift’: they are bought with the intention of being donated, and comprise relations of debt and dependency, moral dimensions like honour and respect, and the dynamics of status. By using the concept of gift in our analysis of women’s souvenir practices, we are able to pay attention to the two different modes of reciprocity involved, the transcendental and the transnational. Concerning the first one, the gift giving relates closely to an investment in building a close and profound relationship with Mary. By intensifying their devotion, and by buying and distributing all kinds of souvenirs, the women honour Mary and expect to receive Mary’s graces in return. When their investment in Mary is rewarded with an abundance of blessings, which makes the women feel strong and self-confident, they start to act as Mary’s intermediaries and spread her blessings to others.

When Emmanuelle got her French citizenship and received many other graces in her post-migration life, she felt that she was appreciated by Mary and could count on her in all her prayers. She recounted:

> Now that I know how to approach Mary and to deal with her, I can be her intermediary. When someone explains his or her specific problem to me, I can transmit it to Mary in such a way that she will respond. I know how to make the correct prayers and sacrifices. I can stand in for that person because Mary and I know each other very well and she will never leave me unheard.
Women like Emmanuelle do not do their devotional work for Mary or for other people only; they also strive for a change of status for themselves. Praying for loved ones and donating the souvenirs to them is not just an altruistic act, but also a way to reposition themselves as confident Catholic migrant women and to climb upwards and closer to the power of the heavenly saints. The status which Emmanuelle achieves finds expression in her room-sized home shrine. Amidst the pictures of popes, and Mary and other saints, there are two portraits of herself. ‘Indeed, that’s me,’ she explained. ‘I deliberately put myself there.’ As we will read in Emmanuelle’s story later on, she expects to get much in return, not only in terms of empowerment from Mary or respect from her friends in Paris, but also from the recipients of her gifts in Congo.

When women send pilgrimage souvenirs to their relatives in Africa, they reinscribe new meanings to the gifts, which we therefore might call ‘religious remittances’. Extending the meaning of the concept ‘remittance’ from money transfers to the sending of religious things is in line with other proposals seeking to widen the economic scope of the concept, like the notion of ‘social remittances’ introduced by Peggy Levitt (1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011), and that of ‘gift remittances’ introduced by Cliggett (2005). Religious remittances highlight the social basis of gift giving and ‘investment in people’ (Cliggett 2005, 36) rather than their monetary value. While the term ‘remittance’ implies a unidirectional flow, the focus on pilgrimage souvenirs as gift remittances draws reciprocity and mutual benefits into the debate. In our case it may help to rectify a widely held ‘gender myth’ in the literature on gender and remittances (Kunz 2015, 209). This myth represents women as primarily altruistic compared with men, and ascribes women’s altruism to their so-called ‘traditional gender roles’ (e.g. Blue 2009, 65–7; Abrego 2009, 1071–2). This is relevant because the women are as keen on their own interests as on those of the people to whom they send the souvenirs. Interestingly, in their verbal accounts, the women in our study enthusiastically confirmed their altruism and ‘traditional’ caring gender role; however, they also articulated the benefits and power that they gained in their accounts and practices with the pilgrimage souvenirs. They did not remit pilgrimage souvenirs because their traditional gender role would have them do so. Instead, they creatively adjusted and re-signified their gender roles and reinvented this particular kind of gift giving as an answer to the specific problems they encountered in their post-migration life. In many ways, the women benefited from the sending of religious souvenirs, as will be illustrated by Emmanuelle’s experiences and actions.
Emmanuelle: an expert in souvenir shopping and remitting

Emmanuelle described her first years as an illegal immigrant in Paris as characterised by loneliness and insecurity. In 1996, her precarious situation reached a climax when her only daughter fell seriously ill and was on the verge of dying. At this moment of despair, Emmanuelle discovered the renowned Marian chapel in Rue du Bac where she bought a miraculous medal and put it on her daughter’s ailing body. When, two days later, her daughter recovered, Emmanuelle realised that she had been saved by Mary. She also recognised that she could use Mary’s power to get a grip on her situation, and even heal and act as a mediator.

Emmanuelle started making weekly visits to the chapel in Rue du Bac, which is by far the most popular shrine in Paris. According to its foundation legend, the Virgin Mary appeared to the nun Catherine Labouré in 1830 in order to offer the world a miraculous medal (Figure 4.1). Reproductions of the medal are oval, usually of small size (1 x 1.5 cm) and meant to be attached to a necklace or pinned to the inside of one’s


Figure 4.1 The Miraculous Medal, in a pilgrim’s guide to the Rue du Bac chapel in Paris, entitled ‘Chapelle Notre-Dame de la Médaille Miraculeuse’. Private collection of the author.
garments. One side of the medal shows Mary standing on half a globe, her hands raised level with her hips, and her fingers sending out rays of light. The reverse shows a cross (representing Christ’s sacrificial death), an M (representing Mary) and two hearts (the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary). In the souvenir shop adjacent to the chapel in Rue du Bac, Emmanuelle soon discovered another powerful gift: the green scapular (Figure 4.2). The scapular (3 x 4 cm) is made of a rectangular piece of green cloth and shows a full standing image of the Virgin Mary with the radiant Immaculate Heart on one side and the burning heart of Mary, pierced by a sword and with drops of blood falling down from it, on the reverse side. A loop is sewn onto the green cloth to pull a green cotton string through, or to pin it, like the medal, to the inside of one’s garments.

Emmanuelle started to buy the medals and scapulars to send home, believing they would grant Mary’s protection to those wearing them. She also expanded her travel to other Marian pilgrimage sites and became an expert on the souvenir markets in Lourdes and San Damiano. Similarly to what Kaell (2012) found in her study of women buying Holy Land souvenirs as gifts, we too noticed that souvenir shopping was not seen as pleasurable recreation time but as hard work; some women even missed crucial rituals because, as they said, ‘they had important work to do’.

**Figure 4.2** The Green Scapular, on top of the accompanying information leaflet provided by the Rue du Bac chapel in Paris. Private collection of the author.
From cheap mass-produced commodity to precious gift

On her pilgrimages to Lourdes, Emmanuelle always takes bottled holy water home, as it is a crucial item in her protective healing work. Besides the small bottles to be sent to her home country, she collects large containers of holy water to be distributed among friends and relatives in Paris. The souvenir market in San Damiano is Emmanuelle’s favourite one for bulk shopping. She is well informed about price fluctuations and always able to negotiate a deal. During her pilgrimage in 2012, Emmanuelle bought about 300 rosaries and 500 white handkerchiefs to be shipped home. As lengthy prayer sessions in Latin are an outstanding characteristic of the ritual programme in San Damiano, Emmanuelle bought lots of prayer leaflets to be sent and distributed with the rosaries. Pearly-white handkerchiefs, too, are a local souvenir speciality of the Italian site. Emmanuelle buys many to send to Congo, often as complements to the miraculous medal and scapular from Paris, and small amounts of holy water from Lourdes or San Damiano.

By default, the souvenirs are not imbued with power; the items have to be consecrated to hold Mary’s power. Only then do they turn from commodities into precious gifts. Officially, this work is reserved to priests. Though Emmanuelle always asks the priests to bless her merchandise, she also acts with authority, knowing there is more work to be done. Besides getting the priestly blessing, she places them for a while next to the Blessed Sacrament in church, puts them at the feet of Mary’s statue in the chapel of Rue du Bac, rubs them against the grotto in Lourdes, exposes them to the sunlight in San Damiano or articulates (Latin) prayers over them. These are all ritual animations of the ‘little things’, the mass-produced, not yet enchanted commodities, turning them into ‘media of presence, used to act upon the world, upon others, and upon oneself’ (Orsi 2005, 49). After this, Emmanuelle keeps the gifts at home until she has enough stock, and enough savings, to ship them to Congo.

Not all souvenirs that are turned into precious gifts will continue on their way as religious remittances and gain the power to protect and heal across borders. Though the women we studied usually buy all kinds of pilgrimage souvenirs (including postcards, bookmarks, mugs, key rings and various house decorations), they consider only a particular set of souvenirs suitable for sending home. These are the small holy water bottles from Lourdes, the miraculous medals and green scapulars from the Rue du Bac chapel in Paris, and the rosaries, pearl-white handkerchiefs and prayer leaflets from San Damiano. These souvenir-remittances are often sent in particular combinations in order to join their powers and make them heal and protect.
From precious gift to religious remittance and holy medicine

The souvenirs that are appropriate for sending home have three corresponding characteristics: they are light and thus transportable, they can easily be worn, carried or applied to the body, and their material allows the owner to feel or touch them repeatedly. To understand the changed meaning and uses of the souvenir gifts as religious remittances, we first turn to Emmanuelle’s experience of remitting miraculous medals.

When Emmanuelle’s nephew, the then 10-year-old son of her younger sister, had declining school results because of vision problems, Emmanuelle sent money for glasses, together with a miraculous medal. After two months, the boy did not need his glasses any more and performed well in school again. This rapid healing was, to Emmanuelle, a sign that her nephew had been cursed by a jealous person who envied his success at school and the financial support he got from his aunt in Paris. According to Emmanuelle, when a medal works so promptly it means that the problem was caused by black magic, performed by someone who wanted to hurt and obstruct him in school. A delay in a medal’s working would show that it is a normal malady, to be cured by doctors in hospital. ‘When it is a magic malady,’ Emmanuelle explained, ‘Mary will waste no time and heal instantly.’

She told other, similar stories about miraculous medals. An interesting example concerns the medal she sent to her father, who fell seriously ill in 2002. Being in France, Emmanuelle could not directly intervene, but sending him a medal was a way of taking care of him across borders. While she expected the medal to help him, it killed him instead. Emmanuelle said that the medal was apparently too powerful for him. When it was put under his pillow, he dreamt there was a Lady showing him that he was going to burn. Emmanuelle explained that the rays of light coming from Mary’s hands are ‘blessings for us’ but ‘fire for those who do wrong’ (Figure 4.3). Her father admitted that he did wrong to people by blocking their luck. At first he promised to stop doing evil, but as soon as he resumed his bad behaviour he died. Though he died because of the miraculous medal, Mary could not be blamed for that. He was apparently not a good person, but caused a lot of trouble to people.

Emmanuelle’s assertion that her father died because of the miraculous medal is a strong statement in many ways. It testifies to the strength of her faith in the powers of the medal, it proves that she could work with the medal over long distances, and it shows her faith in the justice of Mary’s
actions even when they killed her own father. The ‘little things’ had become religious remittances, charged with Mary’s power, and useful to intervene in family matters and bring about change. As it concerns European Marian power as well, it is deemed stronger than the spiritual powers at home, such as the evil powers of witch doctors and the hidden powers captured in amulets. The imbued Marian medals are considered so potent that they can act on their own, waging their own war under Mary’s direction.

Emmanuelle describes the medals’ protective and healing power as chasing or destroying the devil and releasing someone’s luck. She does her transnational healing work by using Marian power to unblock what has been blocked with magical power. As a religious healer, she helps her relatives at home to overcome illness and misfortune by defeating evil spirits in the name of Mary. From an African perspective, religious power (‘witchcraft’) can be used for both healing and killing. This recurs in Emmanuelle’s

Figure 4.3  Statue of Saint Mary in the Rue du Bac chapel in Paris. In a pilgrim’s information booklet, ‘Catherine Labouré: la sainte du silence’. Private collection of the author.
way of working with Marian souvenirs: in order to heal with Mary’s divine power, she has to remove obstacles and even allow Mary to kill the people who cause these obstacles. Emmanuelle adopted the idea of Mary combating witchcraft while also attributing killing forces to her.

The religious ideas of immigrants are often the product of missionary work done in the past (Levitt 2007, 14). To understand the meanings that both senders and recipients attach to the pilgrimage souvenirs as religious remittances, we should consider the historical missionary discourse concerning African cultures (see also Levitt 2007, 196ff.). European missionaries saw religious power in terms of a dichotomy between good (related to God) and evil (related to the devil). This contrast fundamentally deviated from African religions, which lacked such strictly dualistic notions. Ironically, in their attempts to adjust Christianity to local customs and make their work understandable and acceptable, they unintentionally integrated those elements which they wanted to eliminate. Instead of witchcraft being replaced by Christianity, witchcraft became a major aspect of African Christianity (see also Merz 2008; Meyer 1999). African Christians adopted the Christianity-versus-witchcraft opposition to distinguish benevolent from destructive divine powers, a duality we now see recurring in the Parisian context: migrant women employ Mary’s power to combat African witchcraft (see also Notermans 2019).

As the women in our study and the people in their communities of origin share an ideology that ‘resonates with a global religious identity’ (Levitt 2007, 84), they not only share transnational connections but also constitute transcendental communities. This implies that they and the recipients of the souvenirs have in common a religious idiom, certain moral standards and an epistemology based on elements of a shared religious worldview. They act within a shared ‘religious space’ (Levitt 2007), comprising (global) Roman Catholic ideas as well as (local) African ideas that illness and ‘bad luck’ come from jealous people using witchcraft or black magic (Mbiti 1991).

The particular pilgrimage souvenirs that Emmanuelle deploys as religious remittances have gained, through her pilgrimage work, the power to heal and protect. The miraculous medal, the green scapular from the Rue du Bac chapel in Paris and the white handkerchief from San Damiano all have curing and protective power, although they work in slightly different ways: the medal, for instance, protects against the devil while the scapular is used for exorcism. The pearl-white handkerchief is said to cure when ailing body parts are stroked with it. An accompanying bottle of holy water is used to wet the handkerchief and make its working stronger. ‘It only works’, Emmanuelle says, ‘when the illness comes

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from the devil. When the devil isn’t behind it, none of the objects, neither medal nor scapular, blessed water or handkerchief will work.’

According to the problem or illness Emmanuelle has to heal, she sends particular souvenirs in particular combinations together with meticulous instructions for use. In the same way as medical doctors prescribe different medicines to be taken differently, Emmanuelle prescribes for each particular illness a specific combination of souvenirs to be applied differently. Sometimes, at the time that the person would use the medicine, Emmanuelle performs a novena (nine-days prayer) in a Parisian church to accomplish her work.

The special effort Emmanuelle makes for some relatives contrasts strongly with her refusal to care for others. Those who blame her for not sending enough money and envy her for being a successful migrant in Europe do not share in her generosity. Rather than giving in to their demands and sending them the religious medicine for healing or protection, she uses it to protect herself. From the migrants’ perspective, the extended family is not a harmoniously supporting network. That is why migrant women like Emmanuelle differentiate between those who are reliable and those who are not, and only donate to the first group.

For her huge investments in travelling and remitting pilgrimage souvenirs, Emmanuelle never wants to be directly compensated. ‘They are gifts, not business,’ she explains. She nevertheless admits that she receives much respect and appreciation in return. Following the successful healings she has produced, her status in the family as an international healer has become established. Emmanuelle finds herself in the position of a powerful intermediary, buying and distributing Mary’s souvenirs, imbuing them with divine power and producing all kinds of healings. This work also imbues her with Mary’s power and empowers her to act on behalf of Mary.

The way Emmanuelle combines different souvenirs to give them the extra power of medicine reminds us of Tim Ingold’s thinking on how materials correspond (Chapter 1 in this volume). He states that things are not ready to use; they rather become something in the process of making. When materials correspond, he states, they become something new together. This we recognise in Emmanuelle’s creative practice of combining souvenirs for new uses. She improvises and joins with the world of pilgrimage souvenirs in order to make something completely new: a set of souvenirs whose materials correspond through absorbing, including or expanding each other. She makes the souvenirs correspond to join their powers and transform them into an exceptionally powerful healing power.
Directed and undirected religious remittances

At this point in our effort to go deep into the little things-in-motion that the migrant women sent home as religious remittances, it is relevant to distinguish the abovementioned ‘directed gifts’ from another group of religious remittances, the ‘undirected gifts’ (a distinction also mentioned by Kaell 2012, 138, 147). The directed gifts are precious gifts that are sent as religious remittance and holy medicine to specific relatives at home. Emmanuelle sends them only to relatives with whom she has good relations. We asked Emmanuelle to explain the difference between money and pilgrimage souvenirs as directed gifts and remittances. She said:

Money can be sent to everybody, the souvenirs cannot, you carefully select for each person something special. Besides, relatives easily spend the money on one single thing while the blessings they receive from the souvenirs may give them manifold things that will last a long time.

By sending close relatives religious rather than monetary remittances, she is able to help them in the long term and in multiple ways. Moreover, she remits on her own conditions rather than responding to monetary claims made by others. Nevertheless, Emmanuelle also sends money to selected close relatives, for medical treatment, surgery in hospital or school fees. Living close to a big Parisian market, she regularly buys clothes, shoes and accessories for them, but these are remittances of another and less valuable kind than the religious ones.

The undirected gifts are those bought in bulk and distributed widely among associates. The bulk items Emmanuelle sends consist of rosaries and prayer leaflets; they are directed to prayer groups, priests and parishes at home. First, these items are sent to a beloved sister or friend in Kinshasa, who then personally distributes them among prayer groups and parishes, and recipients are told to pray for the sender. With all the prayers and blessings she gets in return, Emmanuelle finds her work more than rewarding: ‘By sending gifts, the good will come back to me. It will open new avenues, unblock the things in my life that have been blocked.’ As an example of this ‘unblocking’, she mentions that she expects soon to receive a positive response to her prayer for grandchildren to fill her empty house.

To her, the most precious return gift is the fact that the recipients praise her and speak positively about her. Recognition as a successful and
generous migrant in Europe is one of the best things a migrant can get after all the suffering of making a living there. Another crucial reward in return for the bulk shipments is a welcome at home (see also Cliggett 2005, 44). Sending the rosaries to prayer groups and parishes is a way of securing accommodation when returning one day. A kind of upward mobility is also achieved: when she returns, she will not be just with her family but with religious mediators like herself, and her status will be equivalent to the status she has gained in Europe.

Significant in Emmanuelle’s account is that she not only attributes higher powers to Mary vis-à-vis evil spirits, but that she accordingly gives herself a higher position vis-à-vis the people at home who lack the knowledge and methods to evoke those powers. People respect her, she says, ‘because she is so close to Mary and Jesus’. Herewith she upgrades her position in her transnational social field.

**Conclusion: pilgrimage souvenirs and their multiple connectivities**

Our study focused on a variety of small, cheap and site-specific souvenirs that a particular group of African Catholic migrant women in Europe select from the material culture of European Marian pilgrimage. We studied them as things-in-motion that get new meanings and uses along the way. Some of the pilgrimage souvenirs turn into precious gifts (to people in Paris), others act as powerful medicine (to those in Africa). Besides the medicine that is sent back home as a directed gift to heal and empower close relatives, women also send undirected bulk-gifts to parishes and prayer groups to enlarge the blessings and status appreciations that they will get in return.

Women’s remitting appears to be far from altruistic. The migrant women sought ways to re-signify their gender obligations and to adapt these to the new migratory context. In many ways, the women benefited from buying and circulating those trifling things that may appear ‘worthless’ to the outsider. Besides helping the family at home, they used the souvenirs to protect themselves against unforeseen circumstances in the migratory context and against malicious relatives in Africa. They received respect in the family, and a good reputation as successful migrants in the society at home. They acquired power by giving souvenirs, a power they used to intervene in family matters at home and which enabled them to remit on their own conditions. Finally, through remitting the souvenirs,
they also worked on their own empowerment. The more competent they were at working with the religious gifts, the more control they gained over their life in the new environment, and the closer they grew to Mary and to becoming her intermediary. The women sought the opportunity to be charged with Mary’s power in order to use this power for others but also for themselves.

Besides all this, perhaps the most relevant contribution this study offers to the existing literature on women’s gift giving and remitting practices lies in demonstrating the religious meaning and the ‘magical effect’ (Haldrup 2017, 58) of the souvenirs: they generate cross-border healing and protection, they eliminate evil powers as well as the people using these, and make bodies invulnerable. The women send religious gifts that actively interrupt and intervene in family worlds, helping them to produce change in unwanted situations. These migrant women creatively integrate the newly found pilgrimage souvenirs into pre-existing worldviews and healing strategies. In Africa, healing powers are assumed to increase significantly with the movement of healers and medicines (Dilger, Kane and Langwick 2012). These powers now seem to escalate with women’s travelling to and across Europe. The centre of their religiosity is not the home but the European pilgrimage sites which become re-entangled with the missionary discourse on ‘Christianity-versus-witchcraft’, this time with new actors and new motivations, and radiating power to the migrants’ communities in Africa. Adding the notion of religious remittance to the existing notions of economic and social remittances makes clear how the sending of the religious things and the evolving thing~ties (Saxer and Schorch, Introduction to this volume) result in forms of empowerment that help women to care and connect, to overcome the difficulties they meet as migrants and to re-identify themselves as European Catholic Africans.

Note

1. To follow the things-in-motion, multi-sited fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2015 among Catholic (West and Central) African migrant-pilgrims in France and Italy. The women were followed along their religious routes in Paris, France and Italy, and visited at their homes in Paris. The fieldwork consisted of participant observation combined with informal conversations and semi-structured interviews: 40 in Lourdes in France, 40 in San Damiano in Italy, and 15 with (some of the same) women in their Parisian residences. The information on the West and Central African social-religious contexts of women’s lives and gift-giving practices in Paris is based on the long-term (1992–2006) research of one of the authors (Notermans) on women, religion and kinship in francophone Cameroon. The fieldwork was done by Catrien Notermans in collaboration with Maya Turolla, MSc (see Notermans, Turolla and Jansen, 2013, 2016). This text was written by Catrien Notermans in cooperation with Jean Kommers.
References


