19th century experiences of slavery, diaspora and repatriation are reflected in Yoruba returnees’ personal histories of dislocation and re-negotiation of identity and social position. Upon returning to their native land in what today is Nigeria, Yoruba Christian converts, particularly missionaries, found themselves in a religio-cultural interspace: Their backs turned on their ‘heathen’ religion and seeing themselves as ‘òyìnbò dudu’, ‘black white men’, they were still Africans; baptism and European names did not make them equals to their European colleagues.

In Yoruba missionaries’ journals and letters from the corpus of Church Missionary Society correspondence, verbal strategies to negotiate new ethnic and religious identities and group boundaries can be traced. My paper discusses how through re-contextualisation of displacement and slavery in the positive context of conversion and salvation as well as through the linguistic ‘othering’ of non-Christians the authors distanced themselves from their former religious and social affiliations. The use of Christian imagery and Bible quotations identified them not only as proficient theologians and placed them within the Christian ‘community of the mind’, but also meant the acquisition of Christian symbols and texts by Africans for Africans.

I intend to show that Yoruba missionaries employed these linguistic means to re-negotiate their personal and group boundaries and thereby actively wrote a social space for themselves between an ‘African’ and a ‘European’ identity. In this and from this liminal space they were able to exert considerable influence on both their European colleagues and the native population, and act as key figures of evangelisation efforts in Yorubaland in the 19th century.

Keywords: language and mission, social space, identity negotiation.