The Role of Spatial Practices and Locality in the Constituting of the Christian African Diaspora

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Introduction

Many researchers have pointed out how world religions, in particular evangelical and Pentecostal Christianities, enable individual believers to more successfully navigate the spaces of modernity and translocalities (e.g. Van Dijk 1999). In contrast, we focused this issue on how African Christianities are themselves constituting spaces and become entangled in a particular locality of the African Diaspora, namely the Netherlands and in particular Amsterdam. How do individual believers relate to the place where they are, the places they want to go and the place they come from through Christianity? How does African Christianity create its own religioscapes (McAlister 1998) or sacroscapes (Tweed 2006)?

The authors brought together in this special issue are all involved in larger research projects that look into the role of global Christianity and African migrants in Europe. They write 'fresh from the field' so to speak. Marten van der Meulen and Danielle Konings are involved in a project which studies migrant churches and civil society in the Netherlands, titled *The Participation of Immigrant Churches in Dutch Civil Society.* Regien Smit is one of the researchers in a project entitled *Conversion Careers and Cultural Politics* which studies several transnational Pentecostal movements originating in various parts of the world. Kim Knibbe is one of the researchers of an international project entitled *Nigerian-initiated Transnational Religious Networks and Believers in Three Northern Countries.* All are based at VU University, Amsterdam.

In recent years, there has been increasing attention in anthropology to the role of African Christianity in shaping the lives of Africans in Diaspora (e.g. Dijk 1997; Dijk 2001; Dijk 2004; Dijk forthcoming 2009). At the same time, there has been increasing attention to the expansionism of African Christianity from other disciplines such as the sociology of religion and missionary

studies (e.g. Adogame 2004; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Haar 2008; Jenkins 2006; Jenkins 2007). Apparently African migrants are transforming religious landscapes of European cities to an extent that warrants attention from scholars even outside African studies.

Transnationalism, Deterritorialisation and the Importance of Localities

Van der Meulen's article (this issue) describes this transformation as the background of his analysis of the importance of local power in acquiring a place to worship: of the more than 100 churches in the Southeast of Amsterdam, two thirds are dominated by Africans. Through their numbers they transform a neighbourhood that was planned for a secular age into an important locality of the African Christian Diaspora where churches compete with each other for believers, and preachers from Africa visit to hold crusades and special programmes to attract new believers. This competition also increases the need for places to worship, sparking off new dynamics and local politics. Through the presence of African Christians, Southeast is not just a part of Amsterdam, located in the Netherlands, but a significant place on the map of the African Diaspora, a location in a transnational space that connects Lagos, Accra, Berlin, London, Amsterdam and cities across the world.

At the same time, scholars of Christianity have drawn attention to the explicitly global aspirations of particular Christian movements (not necessarily African in origin) and the ways in which their religious practices are intimately intertwined with processes of globalisation (Coleman 2000). A prime example of the self-conscious production of a religious geography through the production of localities is the Redeemed Christian Church of God as described by Knibbe in this issue. The factuality of this geography, the materiality of the church-buildings it has managed to buy, endows the map the RCCG uses to approach Europe with much more persuasive power than it would otherwise have and enables this institution to accumulate more and more believers, mobilise their time, labour and direct flows of money. This calls into question how particular locales produced by religious networks and institutions are in fact crucial in establishing transnational linkages. The importance of localities within African Christian movements in general goes against the observation made by Hervieu-Léger that networks are now the chief modality by which religion relates to territoriality (Hervieu-Léger 2002:103). Rather, networks are used to claim territories and occupy them by creating local congregations at regular spatial intervals.

The term 'deterritorialisation' therefore, does not adequately describe the processes we found. We argue, like other scholars have done before us, not to overestimate the deterritorialising effect of transnationalism (e.g. Favell 2003; Massey 1991). Rather, we should study how transnational movements transform ways of relating to and marking territories. Levitt's (2007) observation that 'religion is no longer firmly rooted in a particular country or legal system' and that 'in this current period of globalization... religion's universality and globalism often take precedence over its national forms' does not correspond to the situation in Amsterdam Southeast and Rotterdam – the locations the articles describe. Through the case studies worked out in the articles of this issue we plead for a more thorough study of the ways in which religion, in this case Christianity, relates to territoriality, produces spaces and localities and how this feeds back into transnational flows but also transforms particular locales.

Space, Place and Maps

By choosing this focus, we have explicitly problematised something that is in fact already implicit in the term 'diaspora': the various ways in which people relate to places, how they locate themselves and others, which (implicit) maps are operational and the signification of particular spaces. This emphasis follows in the footsteps of other similar initiatives, such as Kim Knott's spatial approach to religion and secularity and to diaspora and migration (Knott 2005a; Knott 2005b) and Doreen Massey's approach to place in relation to globalisation (e.g. Massey 1994).

Reading through the articles, it will become clear that we do not use the concepts of space, place and locality in the same way and that each authors draws on a particular body of literature to develop their approach. Koning defines place as the practices of everyday life taking place in a particular locale, while Van der Meulen and Smit define place simply as a bounded geographical entity. Knibbe focuses on the institutional production of locality and uses the term 'maps' and 'geographies' as central concepts to highlight the nature of the power at stake in spatial practices. The diverging uses of spatial terms within the articles reflect how, in the diverse literatures and debates on place and space, key concepts are differently defined. Rather than seeking theoretical unity, however, each of the authors has used the theme to explore their ethnographic materials from a new angle.

Unexpectedly, this angle brought into focus issues of race, which were seen to emerge in the disjunctures between Dutch and African spatial practices.

Associations between 'Africans' and 'dirt' seem to be in the background of the conflict described by Smit about the use of a church building, although the conflict was always framed in terms of complaints about their heavy use of the building. Koning notes that Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventists recognise that they *should* evangelize Dutch Adventists, but that these do not fit in the everyday 'place making' practices of the members of the church. Asymmetric power relations related to being black made missionary practices geared toward the Dutch in general and toward Dutch Seventh Day Adventists even more difficult. Van der Meulen analyses the complaints of African church leaders that white civil servants do not take them seriously and patronize them in terms of the reproduction of the development relationship between the Netherlands and Africa on the local level: typecasting Africans as poor, uneducated and in need of help. Finally, through analysing how a particular area of Amsterdam appears both on Pentecostal maps and on the maps of police and policy makers, Knibbe analyses how Nigerian Pentecostals may, in stark contrast to their own self-perception of the spaces they are constituting and the geography of conversion they are attempting to create, be cast as potential criminal suspects based on skin colour and location.

Although none of the authors explicitly theorise race, this issue became visible exactly because the authors used an approach that focused on space and place. We believe that this has to do with the fact that a spatial approach draws attention to the simultaneity of processes creating and inscribing spaces and how these processes conflict with each other. A more classic historically oriented 'case-study' approach would perhaps miss the structurally 'racial' element in these processes because, on a day to day basis, religious identity is a much more important basis than race for self-identification for the African Christians that we encountered in our research.

The individual articles show that Christianity is instrumental in constituting places and inscribing spaces within the African Christian Diaspora but also how this affects, or contrary to missionary ideals does not affect, the particular locales in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. Regien Smit shows this by focusing on the materiality of the church-building itself that is used by an Angolan dominated Pentecostal church and how this clashes with the very different inscriptions of the spaces of this building by the owners, a Presbyterian congregation. Danielle Koning analyses how the Seventh-day Adventist congregation she studied contributes to the practices of place making of Ghanaians in Amsterdam, and how discourses on the need to inscribe Dutch spaces by evangelizing activities are in fact instrumental to the place making practices of

Ghanaian Seventh Day Adventists themselves, even though they usually refrain from evangelizing these spaces.

At the same time, African Christian congregations become complicit and encapsulated in the spatial planning of particular localities. This is shown by Marten van der Meulen in his contribution on the dynamics of the trouble African churches have in finding a space to worship in Amsterdam South East. He highlights the importance of local politics, and how these local dynamics force African church leaders into roles that do not fit at all with their self-conceptions as leaders of evangelizing churches. Knibbe describes how the RCCG offers a new map to locate African Christians – not as tenants, but as landlords that inverses the implicit power-relationships between Africa and Europe and creates a dynamic that propels the production of localities worldwide. This map clashes with other maps which locate Africans in general and Nigerians in particular on maps of crime and illegality.

There are many issues that we would have liked to explore more, some brought to our attention by the reviewers, but could not for reasons of space and time. One such issue was race, as we indicated above. It would be interesting to more explicitly problematise how race and other categories such as class and religious belonging intersect in particular spaces and how they are intertwined in processes of place-making. Another issue that we did not address but is certainly of great importance is the comparison of the global Christian imaginaries we each encountered in our research with the pre-existing literature on this subject (e.g. Coleman 2000; Eade and Garbin 2007). To what extent are the dynamics we observe here specific for African Christianity and to what extent are they similar to dynamics to be found in other Christian movements? In sum, the contributions the reader finds here by no means exhaust the topic, and we look forward to engaging with scholarship picking up these themes in the context of the study of the African Christian Diaspora.

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ARTICLES