Transnational Religious Networks

– A study of Ghanaian Pentecostals in Europe and Ghana

-- Work in progress --

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Introduction
This paper is about Pentecostalism, migration and social change. It discusses the importance and influence of the various connections between migrants and Pentecostal church communities and show that religion (either as institution, ideology or faith) is an important aspect to study when seeking to understand transnational migration and how social relations are transformed when people live and relate to more than one setting. Of particular interest are the relations migrants engage in with their extended families and home areas and how these are influenced by membership of a Pentecostal community and vice versa. The paper presents and discusses the current literature in the fields of Pentecostalism, migration and transnationalism and aims at proposing an approach to studying transnational aspects of African Pentecostalism. The empirical focus of the paper (based on initial fieldwork) is on Ghanaian migrants in Denmark and transnational Pentecostal networks.

The literatures
The literatures within the broad field of religion and globalisation include studies of global religions as global communities, the role of religion in globalisation, and religion in diaspora. This paper focuses primarily on research on religion as related to transnational migration. This literature focuses on religious practices as part of transnational migrants’ everyday life: on the role of religion in the everyday life of migrants in the host-country, as well as on the influence of religion on creating and maintaining ties to non-migrants (being church members and/or family members) in the home country. (Glick Schiller 2002, Levitt 2003, Van Dijk 1997, 2001, 2002, ter Haar 1998a, Vásquez & Marquardt 2003).

According to Levitt (2003) scholars on transnational migration have until recently ignored how religion (religious identities and practices) influence the processes of transnational migration. The ties between migrant communities and the home country have been studied with focus on economic issues (for example remittances), political organisation and identity formation related to ethnicity (Smith & Guarnizo 1998). African diaspora communities have most often been defined (or understand themselves) according to ethnicity and/or

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1 This work is part of an ongoing Ph.D project. The focus of the project is to analyse how membership of a Pentecostal church and thereby Pentecostal transnational networks, religious practices and values shape the connections Ghanaian migrants create and maintain to their extended families and homeland, and thereby understanding how family relations are changed and negotiated.
nationality (black consciousness, pan-Africanism, Ethiopianism) and in relation to the history of slavery (Patterson & Kelley 2000). The diasporic identity is analysed in relation to the notion of a physical/geographical place, which would be the place of origin: the continent, the nation, a region or a home-town.

In studies of transnational migration Levitt underlines the importance of “examining the ways in which ordinary individuals live their everyday religious lives across borders, explore the impact of these activities on their continued sending and receiving-country membership [...]. We need to understand what difference it makes for sending and receiving country communities when migrants assert their continued belonging within religious rather than ethnic or political arenas” (Levitt 2003: 851-852). She criticises some of the work on diasporic religion for focusing only on religious life in an immigrant context and ignoring the ways in which migration and the religious life of migrants influence and transform the home (or sending) community.

A growing number of books and articles on Pentecostalism in Africa take a transnational perspective (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Englund 2001, 2003; Laurent 2001, Maxwell 2002; Van Dijk 1997, 2001, 2002). As within other fields of study (migration, cultural studies) where transnationalism has been on the agenda for the last decade, the approaches vary a great deal: from treating transnationalism as a thing in itself to transnationalism as an analytical approach. This variety is very much reflected within the literature on Pentecostalism in Africa: ranging from the spread of churches beyond national borders and various organisational patterns to issues such as identity creation and ‘transsubjectivity’.

Maxwell (2002) analyses the role of migrant labour and the spread of Pentecostalism in Southern Africa in the last century. According to him the Pentecostal movement played an important role in relation to migrants moving from rural to urban areas in Southern Africa in the 1950s and 1960s (ibid.: 305). Englund (2001) writes on transnationalism and township Pentecostalism in urban Malawi and emphasises that both inclusion and exclusion are facets of transnational Pentecostal networks. These networks are not only empowering and

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providing opportunities, but also create new hierarchies (ibid.: 238). There seems to be a turn in the literature from focusing merely on the liberating aspects of Pentecostalism to also recognising exclusion as well as new bonds and hierarchies as related to Pentecostalism (Englund 2001, Laurent 2004, Meyer 2004). However, Van Dijk (2001) subscribes to an ‘anthropology of transnationalism’ in his writings on Pentecostalism and the Ghanaian diaspora in the Netherlands, which he explains (referring to Arjun Appadurai and scholars in transnational migration) as being an approach to study “how identities are formed in situations where, as a result of diasporic flows, communities arise that neither seem to have a firm ‘geographical’ anchor nor the means to create the individual as a local, cultural subject” (ibid.: 218). This approach celebrates transnationalism as liberating and as freeing the person from constraints and relations to others. Van Dijk concludes that Pentecostalism in the Ghanaian diaspora cannot be understood as such a single trajectory, although he seems to be insisting more on opportunities than constraints. The perspective of Van Dijk also includes analysing how migrants engagement in transnational Pentecostal networks influence their relations to home, however this perspective has only sporadically been dealt with in the literature on Pentecostalism in Africa. The literature on hometown associations can provide insights into concepts such as obligations and other motivations for keeping a link to an area of origin (Henry & Mohan 2003, Lentz 1994, Geshiere & Gugler 1998). Moreover, it seems that the literature on Pentecostalism in Africa is limited in the sense that it only rarely compares with or draw on the extensive literature on Pentecostalism in Latin America and Asia and moreover, and even more surprising, the growing literature on other transnational religious movements is ignored (Capone 2004, Babou 2002, Salzbruun 2002).

When studying transnational Pentecostalism and migrations in an African-European context, some insights can be gained from studies of religion and transnationalism in other geographical contexts. Studying religion and transnational migration in the Americas, Vásquez and Marquardt (2003) argue that religious networks and organisations are important to processes of transnationalism. Studies of such networks can shed new light on the creation of transnational flows, boundaries and new forms of associational life (see also Capone 2004). In general, studies of religion have been preoccupied with space and spatial relations (profane/sacred, this world-worldly and other-worldly) and according to Vásquez
and Marquardt religion should be analysed as ways of organising flows and not just as production of meaning. In their view, religion creates new forms of associational lives: “Religious institutions, with their long experience in bridging universal claims and particularistic demands across various cultures, are well positioned to offer organizational resources to these new forms of associational life” (2003: 54). Their understanding of transnationalism entails an understanding of ‘traditional’ communities (built on face-to-face encounters) as communities that are dissolving or breaking down and the emergence of new communities in “a world that has become increasingly baffling” (2003: 55). This understanding is, in my view (but of course depending on context), the ‘anthropology of transnationalism’ at the extreme; focusing on flows and fluidity at the expense of the so-called traditional communities. This approach is somehow narrow, as it fails to see the dynamic relations between different communities (or localities) and, in particular, how these relations shape ‘traditional’ communities.

**Approaches - the individual versus tradition and families?**

Research on Pentecostalism in Africa shows that membership of Pentecostal churches can lead to new ways of relating to the world, including relationships with one’s past, one’s ancestors and one’s family. Conversion is seen as a personal transformation, a means of distancing oneself from established social bonds and relationships, and as ways of legitimising an escape from the burden of ‘traditional’ obligations and expectations (Meyer 1998, Laurent 1999, 2003).

This conception, in my view, needs to be challenged since membership of a Pentecostal church does not necessarily mean replacing one set of social relations with another. There is a need to add to, nuance, and challenge the existent knowledge on the role of Pentecostalism in particular with regard to transnational migration and to seek further knowledge on the apparent paradox/contradiction that migrants at one hand engage in transnational Pentecostal communities, which replace former social relations, and at the other hand establish and keep various forms of transnational ties with their extended families and home areas. Or in other words how are we to understand the processes of continuity and discontinuity in which transnational Pentecostal migrants engage?
When dealing with transnational Pentecostalism the importance of ‘place’ is different from other transnational networks or communities, which are ethnic or regional based. The individual’s relation to the surrounding world is informed by the Pentecostal doctrine. When converting the person enters into a new, well defined and closed community, and is no longer part of ‘this world’ (in theory). Still, the focus on prosperity and success in the Pentecostal discourse enables church members to legitimise obtaining material and economic wealth, which is an expression of managing affairs of this world. The notion of ‘place’ is in this way reintroduced, not in a symbolic way as described above, but as the material manifestation of the blessings of God. The Pentecostal migrants’ relation to specific places or locations is not about relating to a motherland, but rather a way of relating to categories as the good and the evil, and then reflects new divisions of the world. Or as expressed by Levitt et al (2003: 570): “... a migrant’s loyalty to place – a village or district – might take a back seat to wider affinities of genealogically and religiously defined Networks or communities”. Still, the significance of transnational religious networks and how these are used when creating links to one’s home and family are not well known. Therefore the underlying assumptions on the role of religion in transnational relations and social transformations need to be examined through empirical work.

In having emphasised rupture, individualisation and the escape from the grip of kinship relations, much of the literature on Pentecostalism in Africa (Meyer 1998, Van Dijk 2002, Laurent 1999, 2003) tend to focus on kinship and family relations only as obstacles, and not as resources. This moreover reflects an understanding of family relations, the meaning of family, and how families are constituted as something fixed, static and ‘traditional’. Other scholars (Berry 2001, Clark 1999, Lentz 1994) working on family relations in Ghana (in relation to property, history and migrancy) see family relations as changeable relations, and family ties as “continually in the making...” (Berry 2001: 150). Both approaches see families as important to people, but interestingly in quite different ways: one as an obstacle for personal progress and success and the other as a way to negotiate access to resources.

The literature on Pentecostalism reproduces a dichotomy between traditional and modern in it’s way to approach new Pentecostal movements and transnationalism, where (to put it roughly) kinship relations are seen as ‘local’, and related to the past and to tradition, which is
an obstacle to progress and success. I see the approach of Berry, Clark and Lentz as more fruitful in its way to focus on how the meaning and constitution of family in itself is negotiated. Family relations “promote ongoing communication and exchange among people who may be scattered over great distances and are continually on the move” (Berry 2001: 140). Family relations can also be transnational, present opportunities and assets, and are not only ‘local’, ‘traditional’, and constraining. Moreover in the literature on hometown associations in obligations are seen as part of family relations and are described as a form of instrumental rationality (Henry & Mohan 2003: 615). This means that migrants create and maintain links to people at home (for instance through support in various ways) “in order to ensure that there will be some personal or group gains in the future”. Also Lentz has analysed migrants’ behaviour towards home as strategy for self-advancement (1994). Again these understandings seem to differ a lot with the literature on Pentecostalism in Africa and in the African diaspora, where the focus is on breaking away from family obligations. Inherent in this understanding is a sort of one way obligation relationship, where migrants do not expect anything back from the family. Important questions to analyse are if and why Pentecostal migrants are willing to cut themselves off access to a number of resources through family networks and how Pentecostal migrants relate to their area of origin and their extended families?

It is important to emphasise that focusing on transnational networks does not mean decontextualising religious institutions, practices and engagements. The point is that transnational religious networks always are situated and an analysis of such networks can contribute to an understanding of the role of Pentecostalism in Ghana, which goes beyond the more descriptive accounts (Gifford 1998) and analyses focusing merely on discourse, identity creation and religious concepts and ideology (Meyer 1998, Van Dijk 1997, 2001). This focus will permit the researcher to get an in-depth understanding of the role of Pentecostalism in social transformations and in particular to analyse implications of these at a wider scale, not limited to Pentecostal communities themselves. When focusing specifically on migration, a religious perspective might challenge the perceived role of migrants as maintaining relations with a home-town, a chief, or having a particular geographical sense of belonging (Geshiere & Gugler 1998, Henry & Mohan 2003, Owusu 1996) and add to the understanding of negotiations of family relations (obligations, loyalty) in migrant families in Ghana (Lentz 1994).
The study

The main objective of this research project is to contribute to an understanding of how transnational religious networks are created and maintained and how they are used by Ghanaian migrants in their interaction with their extended families in Ghana. The project will not only focus on the nature of connections and transnational activities, but also intends to analyse how Pentecostal migrants negotiate the meaning of ‘family’ and thereby to understand the implications of Pentecostalism on migrants’ commitments and obligations towards their family and home. The overall research questions are formulated as follows: To what extent and how are the connections and social relations between Ghanaian Pentecostal migrants and their extended families influenced by membership of Pentecostal communities and networks?

The research questions build on the underlying assumptions that membership of a Pentecostal church can lead to transformation of social relations in a broad sense (what has sometimes been formulated as a liberating hypothesis, which is also prevailing in studies of transnational migration), and that transnational practices and engagements of migrants influence life in the home country. These assumptions need to be investigated and justified further.

My focus is the interplay between negotiations of family relations and participation in a (transnational) Pentecostal church community. This implies that the family relations I am focusing on are the relations between a (migrant) family member in Denmark and the family in Ghana. These relations will be analysed in situations of social events such as weddings and funerals. I will try to get an understanding of how the meaning of 'family' and 'home' is negotiated in a context where some family members have migrated and are engaged in Pentecostal communities (either as a member or as a responsible/leader). Negotiating family relations implies negotiating access to various resources, obligations and expectations, as well as positions in power hierarchies.

The project employs a multi-sited research approach, which consists of fieldwork among Ghanaian Pentecostals in Copenhagen and a second European destination (which is still to be defined), as well as fieldwork in Ghana (mainly Accra and around Kumasi). This
fieldwork will be conducted among the families of migrants, as well as in the various churches the migrants are related to. The methods will be a combination of observation and participation, interviews, as well as collection of written and audio-visual material.

**Ghanaian migration and Pentecostalism**

Ghana is one of the countries on the African continent witnessing an explosion and multiplication of Pentecostal churches (Gifford 1994, 1998, 2004). The growth of Ghanaian Pentecostalism has not been limited to Ghana, but has been transnational, either by the setting up of church branches in the USA and Europe or by the creation of independent churches in the Ghanaian diaspora. The Pentecostal churches of Ghana have close connections to the Ghanaian diaspora in Europe. The churches (mainly from Accra and Kumasi) are setting up branches in Europe and there is a flow of ideas, images, and people in these transnational communities (Van Dijk 1997, 2001). Pastors from Ghana will preach in Amsterdam or Hamburg and Ghanaian missionaries will be sent to Europe. This recent development is a phenomenon mainly found among West African migrants in Europe. In the United Kingdom the creation of new churches has been done mainly by Nigerians, whereas Ghanaians have been the founders of ‘African’ Pentecostal churches on the European continent⁵ (ter Haar 1998b). In Denmark African Christian churches have existed since the early 1990s and are mainly to be found in the area of Copenhagen. Today there are nine African congregations gathering mainly West African migrants (founded and leaded by Ghanaians) and migrants from the Great Lakes region (Thomassen 2003). As mentioned above there are important Ghanaian communities in many European countries, which is due to the long tradition for migration in Ghana.

From the late 1960s there was a change in migration patterns from Ghana, which was mainly due to economic decline. As a result Ghana turned into a country of emigration in the 1970s and 1980s (Peil 1995). Two million people left Ghana between 1974 and 1981, of which the

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⁵ There are important African minority groups in most EU countries and particularly in Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Belgium. According to Ter Haar (1998a: 74, 132) the rise in migration from Africa stems mainly from Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana and DR Congo, and in the mid 1990s Ghanaians constituted the largest migrant community in Europe (in 1994 about 80,000 officially registered in the EU). According to the National Statistics Denmark this trend is also valid for Denmark. There were in 2004 about 21,655 people originating from Africa in Denmark (more than half are from Somalia), of which 1,239 are Ghanaians. The figures include Ghanaian citizens, as well as Danish citizens originating from Ghana.
The majority was from southern Ghana (Van Hear 1998: 74). Migration was a way to survive and those who migrated were mainly un-skilled labourers and young men. However, an important number of the migrants were women, but it was a migration of single men and women rather than households (Van Hear 1998: 76). In the 1970s many Ghanaians migrated to Nigeria. However, this pattern changed after the expulsions from Nigeria in 1983 and again in 1985 (Van Hear 1998). In 1983 the Nigerian government took the decision that all illegal immigrants should leave the country. Up to two million people were forced to leave, of which half were Ghanaians. A second expulsion took place in 1985 (Van Hear 1998: 72-73). After 1985 Ghanaians sought other destinations than Nigeria. These were mainly West African destinations such as Togo and Cote d’ivoire, but Ghanaians also migrated to the Western metropoles (London, Amsterdam, Hamburg and New York). Ghanaian migration to Europe increased until 1992 and then decreased, many sought asylum or entered as students (Van Hear 1998: 208-209). Peil (1995) estimates that 10 to 20 per cent of the Ghanaian population lived abroad in the 1980s and 1990s. It was a household strategy to spread family members widely, which means that many Ghanaian families today have members at several continents. The reasons for migration were mainly economic and political, but as these situations improved during the 1980s and 1990s people continued to move. Van Hear explains this by an “accumulation of the migratory culture”, which includes “bridgeheads and networks” (1998: 211). The roots of this culture lie in pre-colonial trading networks in West Africa and also in labour migration and rural-urban migration under colonialism. The networks through which people moved at that time were according to Van Hear the military service, students abroad, trade and professional links (Van Hear 1998).

Ghanaian migrants have kept and keep strong links to Ghana in the form of remittances and home town associations. Many Ghanaian households, as well as the housing industry, depend on remittances sent from Ghanaians abroad. As an example of the importance it can be mentioned that remittances from Ghanaians were as much as 300-500 million dollars annually in late 1970s and early 1980s (Peil 1995, Van Hear 1998). Recently the Ghanaian government has taken an initiative to collect resources from Ghanaians living abroad. The funds are to be used for development initiatives and investments (Ghanaian Chronicle - Online, July 21, 2004; Ghana Review International, September 14, 2004; interview with Daniel Odoom).
In a study of Ghanaian diasporic institutions in London Henry & Mohan (2003) identified various kinds of involvements with the home country. These were: person-to-person transfers of money, community-to-community transfers, identity building/awareness raising, lobbying in current home on issues relating to home country, trade with and investment in home country, transfers of tangible resources, 'professional' support for development and payment of taxes in home country. They moreover noted that many Ghanaian migrants had multiple ties to a number of locations in Ghana as they had been engaged in a multi-stepped migration process. By this they mean that migrants first leave their 'ancestral' home for Accra or another big city and that the next step then is leaving for another country (Henry & Mohan 2003: 617).

The biggest Ghanaian communities are to be found in cities like London, Hamburg and Amsterdam. Hamburg and Amsterdam are moreover the cities with the largest number of African congregations (Ter Haar 1998a: 134). As mentioned above the trend in African migration is also reflected in migration to Denmark, where Ghanaians constitute one of the largest groups of migrants from Africa. A number of African congregations have been established recently in the area of Copenhagen, most of which are of an evangelical or charismatic nature. Again the European trend is reflected in Denmark where mainly West Africans (in particular Ghanaians) have founded the churches (Thomassen 2003: 62). However the numbers are relatively small compared to Amsterdam and Hamburg. In Hamburg there are almost 5,000 Ghanaians registered, out of a total African population of 15,800, and there are 50 African Pentecostal churches (Ekué 2001: 224-226; Thomassen 2003: 35). Likewise, in Amsterdam there were about 25 Ghanaian churches in 1995 (Van Dijk 1997: 139).

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The ‘African’ churches in Europe are part of transnational Pentecostal networks. They have contact (formal and informal) to other ‘African’ churches in other European countries, the US and Africa. An example from my own study is the ‘International Harvest Christian Center’ (IHCC) based in Copenhagen and founded by a Ghanaian. During the first six months of 2004 the church had visits from Australia, Congo, Tanzania and Zambia and the founding pastor went on missions and attended meetings and crusades in London, Kiev, France, Ghana and Congo (Harvest Time: April-May 2004, June-July 2004, Anniversary Edition). IHCC has close links to the church ‘Harvest International Ministries’ in Accra, which is formed by friends of the pastor. Through the church in Ghana the IHCC is implementing a development project in a village (Amanfro) in Southern Ghana, and plans to plant a church and do spiritual as well as material development work in the village.

There are various explanations of and motivations for being member of an African Pentecostal church in Europe. The church and the related associations might offer a social network and a protected space where migrants can establish social relations with people coming from the same country or region as they do themselves (Ekué 1998). Membership of a Pentecostal church might alternatively or at the same time provide access to networks which can be used by the migrants to create rooms for manoeuvre for managing transnational relations and lives. Van Dijk demonstrates how Ghanaian pastors and other actors in transnational religious networks very actively are seeking to assist migrants in their personal projects, both in the host country (the Netherlands in this case) as well as in the country of origin (Ghana) when leaving and returning. These cases show that pastors in the host country play a significant role in the life of the migrants when they first arrive. They facilitate contacts and help obtaining the necessary papers; one can say they act as brokers. When the migrants return to Ghana the churches direct them to the Pentecostal community in order for the migrants to escape the obligations (moral, economic, social) towards the family (Van Dijk 1997, 2001, 2002).

My own observations indicate that Ghanaian members of international or African Pentecostal churches in Copenhagen differ a lot in their attachment to the church. Some

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5 These churches do not call themselves African, but uses ‘international’ in their names. The members of most of these churches are not only from Africa, but also migrants from other places as well as Danes.
attend church services at more than one church, whereas others are loyal to one specific church. The relation to the pastor is not necessarily very close, he is seen as a person who provides moral guidance in various matters, but not particularly in relation to the personal life of the migrant. In my preliminary fieldwork there is no indication that membership of a Pentecostal church leads to clear breaks with one’s family, but this needs to be investigated further with regard to the religious affiliation of the family, family relations before migration etc.. There are a number of ethnic/regional based Ghanaian migrant associations in Denmark. They organise cultural festivals\(^6\), funeral ceremonies and seek to promote Ghanaian culture in Denmark. There seem to be an opposition between these migrant associations and the Pentecostal churches, where the Pentecostals disagree on the way funerals are celebrated (collecting money for instance) and the migrant associations express frustration because of the success of the churches, which according to them complicates their work. Concerning regional attachment the Pentecostal migrants I have talked with, are not mentioning any specific attachment to an ‘ancestral’ home. Instead there seem to be other regional attachments which can be related to the church (as in the case of IHCC and the attachment to the village of Amanfro) or be related to one’s professional life.

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\(^6\) Recently an Akan cultural festival has taken place in Copenhagen, with ritual dancing, celebration of ancestors and enstoolment of a king and a queen.
Bibliography


Other material:

Harvest Time, news magazine from International Harvest Christian Centre

Ghanaian Chronicle - Online, July 21, 2004

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