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The Soul is the Stranger: Ghanaian Pentecostalism and the diasporic contestation of ‘flow’ and ‘individuality’

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ABSTRACT Pentecostal groups have become a prominent part of the process of migration of Ghanaians to the West. In popular conceptions, migration is above all a spiritual problem. Operating from Accra and Kumasi, charismatic Pentecostal churches have been established in the Ghanaian migrant communities of the larger cities in the Netherlands. This article analyses the position these churches take in diasporic communities by asking why it is that Pentecostalism par excellence appears to offer the kind of symbolic discourse and praxis that fosters the constitution of a transcultural and transnational domain. Moving away from bipolar approaches to migration and diasporic communities, this contribution argues that Pentecostal transnationality and transculturality negotiate taxonomic state developments that tend to circumscribe and petrify individual identities. All-too-easy notions about ‘global flows’ of people, ideas and practices, and of ‘global individuality’, are critically examined.

KEYWORDS: Ghana, The Netherlands, global flows, individuality, diaspora, migration

Introduction

The rise in the social scientific fascination for processes of globalisation has resulted in two conceptions that have become crucial in the study of world-wide Pentecostalism; conceptions which nevertheless may prevent us from understanding what is really happening ‘on the ground’, so to speak. The first conception is that globalisation and living in a global world is about ‘flows’: that is, an unhampered and unfettered movement of people and ideas around the globe (Basch et al. 1994, Appadurai 1997, Meyer & Geschiere 1999). The second, which I intend to deal with, is that globalisation is seen to foster the intrusion of Western individualism in places such as Africa, i.e. individualism as a fremdkörper in what are generally considered societies that emphasise the communal (see also Piot 1999).

Why would both conceptions apply to the study of Pentecostalism? First of
all, on the level of global flows, Pentecostalism is often regarded as a very significant form of globalisation. This specific form of emotional Christianity has witnessed an almost irresistible spread worldwide. Produced by influential preachers such as Hagin, Roberts, Swaggart and Bonnke, it is interpreted by authors such as Poewe (1994), Hexham and Poewe (1997) and Gifford (1994, 1998) as landing locally. Regions such as Africa and Latin America presumably receive the flows and waves of new Pentecostal groups from America as if there were a borderless world (Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001; see also Beyer 1994). Global Pentecostal organisations not only use a wide range of links to Africa to get their ideas introduced, but local fascination with what arrives from a ‘global’ world on the doorstep, for instance through the use of the modern media, apparently does the rest (see Hackett 1998). Hence, the new Pentecostal movements that have been springing up in great numbers in Africa are interpreted as the product of globalisation par excellence.

This interpretation is closely linked to the second conception, which is that globalisation and thus Pentecostalism is about rising individualism as such. In the field of Pentecostalism there are again many indications that seem to point in the direction of the great influence of Western individualism. Many of the new Pentecostal churches appear to pursue a gospel of individual prosperity, emphasise private enterprise writ large, seek personal redemption, pursue business interests and certainly venerate their influential leaders in a kind of personality cult.

However, in the following paper I do not want to jump to such conclusions. I will take a closer look at whether Pentecostalism, as it has emerged in Ghana, is all about flows and individualism. The rise of new forms of Pentecostalism in postcolonial Ghana is a special case in the sense that it has branched out widely to many places around the globe. In the Netherlands, in a community of about 40,000 Ghanaians, nearly 40 different Ghanaian Pentecostal churches can now be found (Van Dijk 2001a:223). As these churches are mainly attended by Ghanaian migrants, an intriguing relationship appears to transpire that might reveal more about the supposedly ‘global’ nature of Pentecostalism as well as about its supposed individualist ethics.

In this contribution it will be demonstrated that both elements, i.e. ‘global flow’ and its ‘individualism’, should be turned into matters of socio-cultural analysis. Secondly, I shall deal with the question of how these matters may change when these churches and their migrants ‘arrive’ in the diaspora, on the doorstep of Western societies, and encounter different notions of individuality. The first section deals with the transnational and transcultural nature of Ghanaian Pentecostalism and explores the extent to which it has become ‘globalised’. The second section deals with the individualist ethics that are assumed to be part of Pentecostalism and its local expressions. The final and concluding section relates Ghanaian Pentecostal notions of individuality to cultural perceptions of personhood. My contribution concludes by arguing that it is in that critical engagement that Ghanaian Pentecostalism is able to show its features of being neither fully global nor fully local. Instead, it appears to thrive on an active contestation of both.
Pentecostalism and global obstructions in Ghana

If we take a look at Ghana over the past three decades or so, at first sight there appears to be much that would confirm the idea that rising Pentecostalism and globalisation have had a happy marriage. Through the rise of the modern media, the travels of well-known international Pentecostal preachers and the migration of so many Ghanaians to the West, transnational images of Pentecostalism became available on a wide scale as early as the end of the 1970s. Although historical forms of Pentecostalism were present in society before that, the socio-economic circumstances of that moment were conducive to the establishment of hundreds of so-called Charismatic churches (Ter Haar 1994; Gifford 1994; Assimeng 1995; Van Dijk 1999). Within this new brand of Pentecostalism, new mega-churches have emerged, such as Action Faith, Lighthouse Chapel, World Miracle, and the International Central Gospel Church of the very outspoken leader Mensah Otabil. The latter’s church has opened the first Pentecostal university in Africa (in Accra), featuring two faculties: Theology and Business administration. In addition, the entire modern imagery of these churches, the ways in which they play their cards in the media of radio, television newspapers, magazines, all seem to confirm the notion that there is something intriguingly global about them.

Furthermore, they have been very successful in venturing out of Ghana and establishing overseas branches (Ter Haar 1998; Van Dijk 2001a). They have been following the lines of the waves of overseas migration of many Ghanaians to the West (Peil 1995; Akyeampong 2000). That is why, nowadays, many Ghanaian Pentecostal churches can be found in places such as London or New York, where there are branches of Mensah Otabil’s church, or Hamburg and Amsterdam where there are branches of Charles Asare’s World Miracle and Owusu Ansah’s Resurrection Power Ministries. While many of these churches established congregations in the Netherlands, at the same time new Ghanaian Pentecostal churches have emerged in these migrant communities, which have now begun to establish branches from the diaspora back in Ghana again. In other words, in the present world, Ghanaian Pentecostalism is no longer produced within one confined cultural area, but is created in many places around the world at the same time.

From outward appearances, it seems as if we are dealing here with a global phenomenon that is highly represented locally. A number of scholars such as Gifford (1998), Poewe (1994), Hexham and Poewe (1997), and for continents other than Africa Corten and Marshall-Fratani (2001) and Droogers (1999), have indeed argued that these forms of Pentecostalism are distinctively global in the universal truths they claim, in the forms of social organisation and leadership they develop and in the moral messages they propound. For Poewe (1994), Pentecostalism is a global religious culture in much the same vein as Beyer (1994) has interpreted the ways in which these forms of religion appear to be able to spread unhampered by boundaries of states or cultures. Hexham and Poewe have again presented America as the cradle of worldwide Pentecostalism, and perceive a bi-directional influence when they state that: ‘Just as
American religion is exported throughout the world, so large religious organisations abroad export their products to North America’ (Hexham & Poewe 1997:45).

In these interpretations of Pentecostalism, local groups appear to take their leads from global Pentecostalism and seem to appropriate transnational Pentecostal messages, images and notions. Corten and Marshall-Fratani acknowledge the local success of the Pentecostals’ appropriation of these global features in the general public’s perception of these groups where they write:

The force of contemporary Pentecostalism and the reason for its remarkable growth seems to lie partly in this capacity to embody the open-endedness of a global network of flows, a composite of heterogeneous elements flexible and indeterminate enough in meaning to allow their setting to work in a multitude of contexts, yet offering at the same time a stable collection of narrative formulae and well-organised structures which provide a solid anchorage for individuals at large in the frightening sea of possibilities and frustrations (Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001:3).

As this appropriation speaks to the never-ending desire of the locals to come as close to global ideals as they possibly can, such Pentecostalism finds a warm welcome. Under the influence of the spread of global Pentecostal ideology and practice the locals are apparently enticed to pursue conformity, to desire Western forms of worship and to modernise their faith. Hence Pentecostalism seems to have no difficulty in becoming ‘inculturated’ in a kind of top-down fashion, very much at the expense of local religious forms.

At first sight, examples of this process appear to abound in places such as Ghana, leading, understandably, to the conclusion that in Pentecostalism we have found something distinctively global. However, in this section the phrase ‘Ghanaian Pentecostalism’ is maintained, albeit not in an attempt to say that in the face of globalisation this Pentecostalism remains local and cultural, and thus resists being global. Rather, the point will be made that in many ways Ghanaian Pentecostalism has engaged with the global in an attempt to generate a critical distance from the local and some of its cultural traditions. The specific type of ritual within the Ghanaian Pentecostal churches that fosters this critical distance is called deliverance, a practice to which I will return later. Secondly, we also find often expressed in the Pentecostal groups the idea that the global world is one of blockades, of limited travel and above all of limited opportunities. From a popular perspective the issue of globalisation is not about prosperity and unfettered travel, but rather about frustration and how Pentecostalism is capable of addressing this predicament and give meaning to it. The following case of a Pentecostal prayer camp will demonstrate these two issues at hand: namely how in these prayer camps an attempt is generated to create a distance to a person’s own local and cultural traditions, and secondly how at the same time becoming part of the global is constructed by these camps as a (spiritual) obstruction.

In Ghana, on the road leading from the coast to Kumasi, one comes across what superficially looks like any other rural village. At both sides of the tarmac,
huts are scattered around, some in much better shape than others, while people seem to be busy with their daily chores. The image of a mundane, quiet and rural life is, however, a deception, as one soon finds out. A first indication that there is something very out-of-the-ordinary about this place is provided by a small building bearing a sign saying ‘Reception’. Adjacent to that there is another small building with a sign saying ‘International Calls’. The even more perceptive may have noticed that the place has a peculiar name: Adomfa, that is, ‘Blessing Taken’. Here, you have entered not a village, but a ‘hot’ place, the Adomfa Residential Prayer Camp (see also Van Dijk 1997). It is a camp belonging to the Church of Pentecost, and is led by a prophetess and deaconess of the church, Grace Mensah Adu, a lady in her late 70s. This is the oldest of all the Pentecostal prayer camps in the country, which since its inception in the early 1960s has attracted thousands and thousands of visitors to the heavenly powers that the prophetess commands. Her prayers are considered so powerful that they help to resolve a very broad range of illnesses, problems, conflicts and various degrees of misfortune. And many people come to her. When I visited the camp for the first time in 1997, the registration books of the camp showed that over 70,000 people had been there. Some stay just for one day, convinced that the prayer-healing sessions alleviate their problems within that short period. Others will stay for weeks or months before they are certain that the heavenly powers have worked to their advantage. This is why the camp is called residential; one may stay in one of the many houses for as long as it takes to get one’s problem resolved spiritually.

Many visiting the camp seek spiritual resolutions to their problems concerning travel. Often they desire to travel abroad, a desire largely inspired by the global spread of images of the West, its wealth, its luxury, but find serious obstacles on their way. These latter include the inability to find enough money to buy the air-tickets or the passports and visas from the dealers in Accra, the so-called connection-boys. Such an inability is first and foremost conceived of as a spiritual blockage, something that occult forces have concocted and for which somebody else, particularly from within the family circle, must be responsible. So, prophetess Grace Mensah provides for prayer sessions over passports, visa and air-tickets, and urges those who come for ‘travel-problems’ to engage in dry-fasting as it is called; that is, no food and water for the maximum number of days a human body is able to sustain such a regime. This practice is meant to build a person’s own spiritual powers, to enable them to have visitations in the night by spirits who come to inform on the good and the bad. The powers of the prophetess can thus hit hard and provoke a ‘breakthrough’ against those forces that block progress and prosperity. During daytime the Pentecostal prophetess organises ecstatic prayer meetings where special time is reserved for the ‘travel problems’. People facing such issues are requested to come forward so as to receive special blessings. Those who do possess passports and visas, and who want to ensure that their travels to Europe will be successful, put these documents at the feet of the prophetess. She then engages in loud ecstatic prayers so as to ‘bind the powers’ that may concoct something bad for the person to whom these documents belong.
Here, we have found a clear example of how Pentecostalism in contemporary Africa addresses a complex set of issues that revolve around a taxonomic world order, the individual and hopes for prosperity. This case of a prayer camp in Ghana, one of many, demonstrates how in popular understanding Pentecostalism is relevant to the ordinary lives of people in the circumstances of the country. Facing a steadily declining economy, many decide to seek ‘greener pastures’ elsewhere, particularly in Europe, but in so doing rely on specific cultural understandings of the Western world. One of the reasons for the fact that Pentecostalism has become one of the most popular forms of Christianity in Ghana is precisely that: its apparent effectiveness in addressing issues of travel and of ‘making papers’, its salience in counteracting unseen forces and its success in establishing branches outside Ghana, in Europe and elsewhere.

When I stayed at Adomfa for a couple of days I came into contact with many who experienced travel problems. I was struck by the transnational dimension of this and similar prayer-camps. For instance I met a Ghanaian, let’s call him David, who made clear to me a number of the features of these camps which contribute to the creation of their own international domain, a domain largely covered and protected by its particular Pentecostal ideology. He had come from the Netherlands (Amsterdam) specifically in order to spend at least a couple of weeks at this camp. Prayers and fasting at another camp had provided him with a ‘breakthrough’ a couple of years earlier, allowing him to travel successfully to Amsterdam by using a false passport and by overstaying the tourist visa that he had obtained by bribing somebody. Those prayers of some years ago had dealt effectively with some powers, emerging from within his family, which he felt were responsible for the fact that he had been unsuccessful in traveling out of Ghana before that time. Having arrived in Amsterdam, though, he was unsure whether all these occult powers from within his family had been ‘broken’ effectively, as he called it. He was experiencing difficulties in finding work and making a living. He then decided to join one of the satellite-groups that had emerged from these prayer-camps in the Netherlands. Some of these groups were and still are developing as independent Ghanaian Pentecostal churches in such places as Amsterdam, The Hague, Hamburg and London. The prayers did help for a while: he was not visited at night by visions of the occult, obtained a couple of odd jobs and even started a relationship with a Dutch girlfriend. But then troubles came back again and he felt forces from his family mounting against him. His illegal stay in Amsterdam began to become troublesome, his partner walked out on him and he felt a serious threat of spiritual weakening, which in the end would jeopardise his entire position in the Netherlands. Forced repatriation by the Dutch police to Ghana would be considered a social disgrace, as it usually is within the circles of family- and peer-groups, and above all would show a failure to keep afflicting forces under control. He then decided that it was time to seek spiritual help at a prayer camp where the right kind of charismatic powers are available, and he needed to return to Ghana. Upon arrival he went straight to Adomfa and felt that through prayers and fasting another breaking of those power ‘pulling him down’ would soon be
effectuated. His mother had also visited a prayer camp a number of times owing to the fact that her son had not been able to live up to expectations to remit money to her. She had been praying for a ‘financial breakthrough’ on his and her behalf while he was still in Holland. ‘Perhaps’, he said, ‘I will need two more weeks of fasting to get my way back to Amsterdam’.

Instead of ‘flows’, the issues addressed here are spiritually perceived obstacles to much desired but, for many, unreachable travel; obstacles that need to be ‘broken’ with the help of forceful charismatic powers. And this is what Pentecostalism appears to offer: extensive sessions in which, through ecstasy and fasting, such powers can indeed be broken and surmounted. The fact that so many Pentecostal groups have been able to establish branches outside Ghana, despite the many policies that especially Western governments undertake to curb migration as they are faced with the effects of a globalising world, is considered by many a clear sign of their spiritual power.

The kind of ritual process that David went through is called deliverance. The aim of deliverance is that people should be freed from the powers of Satan that hold people in bondage through demonic forces. These demonic forces are proclaimed to reside within society at large, but more particularly within the individual’s immediate circle of family relationships. Satan is particularly believed to work through ancestral or generational curses (nnomee), which may become manifest in specific problems such as barrenness, alcoholism, misfortune or tragic death. Pentecostal believers are therefore urged to be aware of such manifestations that may signal the presence of a curse from a past of which the individual was not aware. Deliverance consists of ‘breaking’ (obu), which is the spiritual breaking of the bonds that keep people entangled with their past, with the latter consisting of their former upbringing within the family circle where the ancestors are venerated at family shrines through the practices of shrine-priests (okomfo). It entails a cultural critique of many ritual practices that are part of daily life (Van Dijk 2001b). Name-giving, outdoing (an elaborate ritual of bringing a new-born child out into the community), initiation, healing and particularly the pouring of libations to the ancestors may signal links with the family spirits that in Pentecostal discourses provoke danger and impurity. In Pentecostal ideology, ancestral curses all result from blood covenants, which in the past have been established through and by ancestors with devilish powers. The answer to such problems is a complete break with the blood tie that keeps a person trapped within the realm of an ancestral curse. It may imply, subsequently, a rejection of many aspects of cultural life (Meyer 1998). All those rituals, such as initiation and funerals, that emphasise the connection to kinship, are made subject to questioning at the prayer camp. By stating at the same time that the person is a product of a past, but a past that can be inspected, interrogated and finally rejected, it appears as if a new identity is being created. That is why, upon entering a deliverance ministry in prayer camps such as the one described above, extensive questionnaires are handed out containing many questions concerning a person’s past (see also Meyer 1998). From these questionnaires a kind of reconstruction can be made of the most important events that have taken place in a person’s past
and the possible occult forces that may have played a role in these circumstances.

David, in common with other young men and women, went through this practice of deliverance and of filling out a questionnaire in sorting out what was obstructing him from becoming successful in his intercontinental migration. In his case as well, a close inspection of his past had to take place so as to decide which influence, which line of ancestral relations, which particular aspect of previous healing practices he had come through, could be held responsible for that obstruction. It appears as if this questioning turns the person into a stranger to his own family, a detachment indicated by the term *ohoho* (literally, stranger). As family curses may haunt the migrant even away from Ghana, the Pentecostal groups offer a kind of ritual protection while travelling and settling in the West. Pentecostal leaders and preachers frequently go to the West and establish satellite groups, for instance among the Ghanaian migrant communities in Amsterdam. The Pentecostal churches thus negotiate a specific kind of what can be called 'strangerhood': a strangerhood that begins at home, so to speak.

The effect of this ritual practice is that global obstruction to prosperity is turned into an issue of creating a specific kind of individuality, inspired and promoted by these forms of Pentecostalism. Potential migrants want to get away from their family ties, want to become independent, and these deliverance rituals are a sure way of achieving this goal. The first question that needs to be answered in interpreting this development is: To what extent does it offset a 'communal' identity that is often assumed to be fundamental in African societies? Secondly, what happens to that individualised identity when these migrants arrive in the West? Assuming that through deliverance many migrants have been able to break, on a spiritual level, with the ties binding them to their ancestry, why is it that upon arrival many of them seek out the Ghanaian Pentecostal groups that have emerged in a place like the Netherlands? One could have predicted that the Western, individualised lifestyle would have suited their newly acquired identity, and that all the conditions are there to make it as a 'self-made man'. Still, many of the Ghanaian migrants take part in the Pentecostal churches, are attracted to deliverance and all sorts of other rituals, and in particular are interested in establishing deeply personal ties with the leaders of these churches. So the question remains: what kind of individuality is fostered by Ghanaian Pentecostalism, and is it individualism at all?

**Negotiating individuality**

In many respects, globalisation is seen as a force that brings unwanted and Western-based individualism to Africa. In this thinking, globalisation is negatively interpreted as an onslaught on an otherwise communal life and communal identity on the African continent (see Piot 1999 for an extensive discussion of these ideas). In that context, Pentecostalism is interpreted as addressing the need to become 'individual', and as offering a religiously legitimised trajectory to do so; a view advocated by many who describe and
analyse its appeal to those exposed to emerging forms of globalisation (see for example Hackett 1998:261, 262; Marshall-Fratani 1998:285, 286; Maxwell 1998:352, 353). Writing about the attractiveness of the Pentecostal churches to many urbanites in present day Ghana, Meyer writes:

Many of them seek to liberate themselves socially and economically from their extended families, and to be successful in life independently. The Pentecostal churches offer them a new individualistic ethics which matches their aspirations to achieve power and esteem irrespective of age and origin' (Meyer 1998:186).

In the context of the present-day development of world capitalism, with its emphasis on private ownership, choice and the possession of an individual identity, such a quest for religiously inspired individuality may come as no surprise. After all, Pentecostalism stresses personal choice and acceptance of the true faith, emphasises the individual possession of the soul (and not the embrace of it by the ancestors), stimulates and promotes entrepreneurial activity and offers 'consecration' of one's possessions and endeavours.

In spite of these appearances, the problems with this interpretation of the search for individuality which Pentecostalism is seen to provide are two-fold. First of all, it runs the risk of denying the cultural and historical forms of individuality that have been in existence in the African societies wherein it develops (for similar views see Lambek 1998).

While Marshall-Fratani comments that there is a danger of assuming a primordial communalism against which Pentecostalism develops its project of individuality (Marshall-Fratani 1998:286), I would push a little further by arguing that we need to examine various modes of individuality, their cultural continuities and discontinuities, and the ways in which Pentecostalism either builds on them or replaces them. Akan culture in its historical development, however, has certainly recognised individuality, its expressions in desires, ambitions, power both for good and for evil, and so on (McCaskie 1995; Perbi 1991).

A second caveat is that the Pentecostal project of individuality may appear to run smoothly, unquestioned and unproblematised, into the interpretations of migration, diasporic cultures and communities, and their developments. Here, the common line of interpretation is that people originating from a communal culture meet hardships with regard to the individualised ways of life in the West. Migrant churches and other migrant associations seem to fulfil important functions of creating a sense of communality that reproduces African life in the West. Unfortunately, and without much critical thinking, this line of interpretation has also been applied to Ghanaian Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands (particularly by Ter Haar 1998).

The internal contradictions in that argument are many. For one, migration studies have for long been haunted by assumptions of Western individualism in investigating migrants' decisions, choices and strategies, as if such individualism could a priori be taken for granted. So, in interpreting the appeal of African Pentecostal churches in the West on the basis of the sense of community they
provide, scholars construct migrants as individuals. Van der Veer (1997:95) has called this the 'romantic trope of the self-made individual'; a person who surveys his situation with the greatest critical distance, innovates consciously all sorts of coping practices by individual choice, by maximisation of chances, by selection through critical reflection of different cultural borrowings, identities and so forth—a migrant in the image of Robinson Crusoe in the West.

However, if migrants are to be interpreted as (Western) individuals, what do they need a communal church for? The paradox here is that if Pentecostalism can be seen to foster a specific individual identity, why then would it at the same time in the diaspora act as a bulwark against Western individualism? An easy explanation, that these Pentecostal churches provide a new and comforting community in which one's identity is subsumed by the group, simply does not fit the individualist ideology of becoming a *woyayie*; that is the one who made it, the one who became 'big' while in the West. Some authors like Ter Haar (1998) have followed such rather quasi-sociological types of interpretations by calling the Ghanaian Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands ‘schuilkerken’ (literally ‘hiding-out churches’), that is, churches in which a person can ‘hide’ and disappear in the mass-membership and adopt a kind of communal but concealed identity. Within these Pentecostal churches, however, nobody really hides, while the church itself is not 'hidden’ either. Instead, a lot of emphasis is put on showing off in nice clothes and jewelry, all in an attempt to make others know that one has made it, has become prosperous and is able to build a house, if not a mansion, for oneself back home in Ghana. In other words, a specific kind of ostentatious individualism reigns in these churches, which does not necessarily bring back to life a motif of communality with the aim of soothing the Western experience. Hence, a much more complex relationship appears to exist between the kind of individualism that the Ghanaian Pentecostal churches pursue and the kind of individualism that they meet in the Netherlands. How is this relationship shaped?

**Controlling flow and identity**

In David’s story we see that there is a fascination with intercontinental migration, with internationalism, and an eagerness to contact and consult Ghanaian Pentecostal groups in the diaspora. Travel to the West for many seems to comply with a logic of fulfilment, of becoming somebody by making it in the West and by controlling the spiritual forces that can influence success.

At the same time, what we also learn from David’s story is that, although breaking and deliverance appear to create some distance to one’s family, local traditions and to Ghanaian society as a whole, neither ‘the global’ nor ‘the Western’ is fully embraced. In David’s engagement with the wider world, and in the way in which he tries to resolve the problems of intercontinental travel and settlement, something distinctively ‘Ghanaian’ transpires. His worries relate to the tough identity-politics of the Dutch nation-state, but these worries are lived, experienced and addressed very much in the realm of the spiritual.

In addition to the fact that, within these Pentecostal groups, Ghanaian cultural
traditions are critically engaged, it is important to see that Western society and individualism are also considered to be full of immoral implications. The modern outlook of many of the churches does not mean that they uncritically embrace Western culture and society. Deliverance is often reinterpreted by the diaspora churches and their leaders as producing both a distance to Ghanaian cultural traditions (which need Christianising), and awareness of the fact that living in the West produces demonic and moral threats that can take the believer by surprise. The West African and the Western world alike are perceived as rife with dangers of all kinds. Pentecostal churches often speak of the global in terms of danger: 'if Clinton sneezes we catch a cold', a leader once explained.

So the question is, what kind of individuality is pursued in the diaspora, as one becomes member of a Ghanaian Pentecostal church? In other words, are we not looking at different forms of individuality that do not necessarily go hand in hand? A short cut to an answer is that it is all about control. It is about having the means, in both a material and a spiritual sense, of supervising one's identity in opposition to those who want to keep a hold on it. I say this because many Ghanaians indeed made me aware of their concerns regarding relations with relatives back home. Images of prosperity produce expectations of gifts and revenues, of chances of sending sons, daughters, nieces and nephews over to the West, of a house being built for them, of lavish funeral ceremonies and the like. Demands on the side of the family in Ghana are high, dangers of bewitchment are substantial, and therefore becoming something of a stranger to one's family circle is considered almost a life-necessity. Many discussions inside the diaspora churches therefore not only concern the possibilities of deliverance as such, but also their meaning with regard to the control of reciprocity and the means by which culturally imperative gift-relations can be balanced (Van Dijk 1999). To give an example: one of the churches in The Hague once held a big and special festival for the collection of money for its own church coffers. On preceding Sundays the leader had made his followers deeply aware of the dangers of receiving gifts: he often noted that, by giving, people want to have something bigger in exchange, and if you accept a gift they get a hold on you as gifts are often imbued with their powers and intentions. The implicit message was of course that accepting gifts from relatives often means big trouble, as those living in the diaspora are expected to meet excruciating demands. For the special festival, however, a well-known Pentecostal preacher and radio-presenter was flown in from Ghana. For two days he spoke in money-donating sessions on the topic of 'Never trust whatever the Devil gives you!'; a message hardly to be misunderstood in the context of this migrant community. Every Ghanaian migrant feels the pressure to give and to send remittances home, but at the same time, this giving is turned by the Pentecostal churches into a matter which is checked and balanced under the aegis of its moral economy and ideology.

There is, however, a second domain for which control of one's identity is considered a life-necessity. This has to do with the enormous efforts the Dutch nation-state has undertaken over the last decade to control and check identities and to curb illegal immigration. The plane-crash of 1992, in which an Israeli
plane crashed into a low-cost housing area in South-East Amsterdam, killing 43 people in a blazing fire, drew attention to the illegal Ghanaian community, particularly in this part of town. The Dutch state since that time has become extremely alarmed by what it perceives as an enormous threat of illegal residence in the country and has instituted many new laws and regulations, all meant to check on identities (Van Dijk nd.). A blacklist was made up of countries from which identity-papers could not be trusted to any extent, and top of the list was Ghana. The state embarked on what euphemistically called ‘verification-procedures’, whereby it sent detectives to Ghana, and even to the remotest villages, to investigate the identities of Ghanaians residing in the Netherlands. Without going into all the technical details here, the stiffening of the identity-politics, with all of its taxonomic techniques, meant that Ghanaians felt that some control of individual identity was necessary to survive as a migrant. Often, state officials would put them through embarrassing questioning or would make them rely on the statements that relatives in Ghana would give about their identity. Through measures of this kind, the Dutch government has been able to intensify its policies of controlling the individual identities of citizens and strangers alike, thereby strongly outlawing all those who do not have proper documents. This policy has become part of an overall strategy of enforcing integration and of fighting the arrival of illegals on the Dutch doorstep. The result has been the creation of taxonomic identities in which knowing the individual identity of the stranger is all that matters, all in an attempt to curb the effects of globalisation and increased immigration.

This development runs counter to the Ghanaian notion of becoming a ‘self-made’ man, a woyayie, that is, a person who ‘made it’ and therefore deserves social esteem. The Pentecostal churches speak to this longing for moral prestige and to the widely-felt need to be in control of how one’s independence is maintained. For instance, whereas the Dutch state has stepped up its efforts to check marriages so that contract-weddings do not form a ‘backdoor’ through which foreigners can acquire legal residence in the country, the Ghanaian Pentecostal churches have ensured that marriage has become a route for maintaining prestige, respect and social esteem:

Mr Z., aged 42, is considered by many to be one of the prominent members of the Ghanaian community and the House of Truth church. He holds responsibilities in the church and advises many a Ghanaian on practical matters of living in the Netherlands. He arrived in the Netherlands a couple of years ago after his wife made a trip to Ghana to find herself a new partner. This is not uncommon in situations where the wife has been able to obtain the necessary papers first. They decided to marry in one of the Pentecostal churches in The Hague as they ‘didn’t want to start living together unholy’. Performing the customary marriage rites in Ghana was of no real interest to them ‘as many unholy things happen during such rituals’, but they made sure to satisfy both their family elders. Prior to the officiation of the marriage the leader of that particular Pentecostal church in The Hague, as is customary, made surreptitious
inquiries about the two marriage partners with colleagues both in Ghana and in the Netherlands to be sure that 'he would not bless what is not holy'.

For Mr Z., however, the important thing came next, as he noted 'I have been and will continue to use this marriage to fight them', thereby referring to the bureaucratic procedures he was going through in trying to obtain a legal stay in the Netherlands. Mr Z. needs a bureaucratic marriage to take place in order to get legal status and to continue with his life in The Hague. The fact that 'men of God' had granted him permission to marry after careful scrutiny and after many hours of 'prayer-counselling' is stressed by him to underscore the moral legitimacy of his marriage as being not a 'marriage of convenience'. Although on 'technical grounds' a formal staying permit has up till this day been refused, he still does not feel victimised. Within the Ghanaian Pentecostal community, Mr Z. and his partner are considered husband and wife and receive full recognition of their status irrespective of their position vis-à-vis Dutch immigration laws.

In the face of these problems of taxonomic individuality, the discourse of the churches is not about *inculturation* or *integration*. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of their Ghanaian-ness in this circumstance is that these churches transform deliverance into a new form of *sociality*, so that paradoxically the fact that Ghanaian culture is critically engaged makes their members aware of being ‘Ghanaian’ in a special way. It thereby creates, as it were, a kind of internal strangerhood that contests integration or inculturation, whereby one as a migrant remains a stranger but is still part of a wider domain that is covered by one and the same ideology. One of the ways to become part of that transnational domain is to engage in the specific forms of sociality that the churches appear to offer.

Obviously the churches provide for a sense of community where one is able to speak *Twi*, where contacts can be established with fellow Ghanaians, where help and support can be found in times of difficulty and where a lot of information about the host society can be exchanged. Much of these functions could and in reality are taken care of by Ghanaian interest groups or ethnic associations. Still, the churches offer something additional, something that acquires special meaning in that context, which is the kind of morally and religiously sanctified leadership that produces sociality as a kind of fictive kinship. It is a kind of identity that offsets, at the same time, elements of Ghanaian cultural traditions, and keeps elements of the identity politics of a Western nation state under control. The fictive kinship that is produced by the churches thereby rests on specific forms of reciprocity of a *distinct* gift-economy that goes unnoticed by the Dutch state but by which thousands of Dutch guilders find their way to Ghana. It espouses a critique of Western individualism, which in many of the Pentecostal leaders’ public proclamations has gone way out of control, without on the other hand embracing a kind of communal identity that many would associate with Ghanaian extended family
life. Neither Western individualism nor extended family communalism is what the Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands envisage. Often the leaders develop into being a surrogate family head (abusua panyiri) who thus becomes the focus-point in social relations of ordinary people and lends a different quality and meaning to sociality. Often, they are involved in all sorts of highly personal affairs of their members, such as the marriage-arrangements discussed above, or funerals, or problems with the authorities, or fights and conflicts between Ghanaians and so forth. Most leaders of Pentecostal churches in The Hague are not employed elsewhere, but their groups are financially responsible for their upkeep. Not many initiatives are taken to come closer to what is perceived as a morally endangering and permissive Dutch societal life. Contacts with autochthonous Dutch religious groups are minimal, the language barrier playing a substantial role. Mixed marriages except those relating to contract-marriages are rare, and not many friendships develop with Dutch-speaking Dutch.

All these points relating to ritual repertoires, styles of clothing and independent economy reiterate the point that inculturation or integration is not on the agenda of these churches, irrespective of the eagerness with which the Dutch government preaches these things as elements of its multicultural ideology. Rather, the specific identity of Ghanaian Pentecostalism implies a form of cultural critique by which a domain is created for interaction that is neither local nor global. I have called this domain a form of ‘internal strangerhood’, which produces its own boundaries of ‘community’ in an ideological understanding of the word. Ghanaian Pentecostalism represents a religious form that appears to be able to cross-cut national and cultural boundaries, but which still is produced by ‘tangible’ groups that require real presence, real face-to-face interaction and must relate to circumstances on the ground, such as a taxonomic order of identity.

**Conclusion: the soul is the stranger**

This contribution has argued that the Pentecostal churches see themselves as controlled neither by the local nor by the global, at least where its creation of individual identities is concerned. Since the early 1990s, Ghanaian Pentecostal churches in the diaspora can be seen to have created both a critical distance towards certain Ghanaian cultural traditions and a distance to the host (Dutch) society and its obtrusive forms of investigation. Based on very distinct notions of moral individuality, these churches do not table ‘integration’, hardly establish relations with Dutch communities, create their own gift-based economy, develop their own entrepreneurial forms, maintain extensive links with churches outside the Netherlands, speak in strong terms about the immoral nature of Dutch society, and so on and so forth. Interestingly, they cannot be perceived to be interested in promoting Dutch citizenship or in establishing fixed identities within stable communities. Instead, the interest lies with critical individuality, with personal moral life and with the saving of the personal soul of the believer. The concept of soul (fоkra) is considered of great importance by the leaders of the Pentecostal groups in the Netherlands. The often-heard expression in
these groups is that *Okra ye oohoo*, meaning ‘the soul is the stranger’ (a well-known Ashanti-saying [Bempong 1992]). What is behind this expression is not so much a Christian conception of soul, although obviously soul is important in Christian dogmas, but more a notion that the soul is the stranger: a spirit which belongs neither to the realm of the ancestors nor to the realm of the roaming spirits (*sunsum*), but forms a third entity of every person. It indicates a specific quality of every individual which, instead of signalling ancestral relations with the family, represents detachment and strangerhood. Both modalities are generally perceived to be present in each and every person; each person is expected to have, in addition to family-spirits, an *okra* and thus an element of strangerhood. Upon death the *kra* will leave the body and return to the High God of *Onyame* from where it came. Hence, every person has its own element of strangerhood that escapes from any sort of control by outside agencies, as it is only responsible to *Onyame*.

Within the context of these Ghanaian diaspora churches, a common expression is that the church and its leader speak to the soul, by saying *asore ye kra*, ‘the church is soul’. This expression indicates that the political field, in this case the Dutch authorities, will never be able to fully capture Ghanaian Pentecostal identity. This ideology, therefore, perceives strangerhood in cultural terms as a duality that runs through the body personal and the body social at the same time. This thinking is not without significance in a context where the Dutch government has increased its efforts of curbing migration from Africa and has put in place a range of measures to check identities and record them in every possible detail. The messages these churches therefore convey to their followings is that, irrespective of their place in Ghana or in the diaspora, they create their own space where individuals can maintain a sense of spiritual and moral autonomy: a point of view many Ghanaian migrants find highly attractive.

Notes

1. The Ghanaian migrant community mainly consists of people in their 30s and early 40s, usually with limited schooling, commonly employed in unskilled or semi-skilled labour, such as fish-, meat- and vegetable-production, office-cleaning or assembly-line production work. Many have a history of migration of several places of residence within Ghana or elsewhere in the West African region before they came to the Netherlands. Many refer to the Ashanti-region around Kumasi as their place of origin.

2. Such denial of individuality in non-Western historical societies leads a remarkably persistent life in Cultural Studies’ approaches to the rise of individuality, e.g. Melucci (1997:64) where he writes:

   In the societies of the past, the meaning of individual behaviour was always sought on some plane of reality lying above or below the individual—nature, the kinship system, the state, class, or Society itself with a capital ‘S’ as a metaphysical entity ... Today ... social action involves us as individuals because we are able to produce autonomously and to recognize the meaning of what we are doing.

3. In anthropology such views of self-made men in a self-made environment have been hotly debated for long. See for instance Thoden van Velzen (2001) on the image of Robinson Crusoe as the prototypical self-made individual.
References


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Rijk van Dijk is an anthropologist and senior researcher at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands. He has done extensive research and published numerous article on the rise of Pentecostalism in Malawi and Ghana. He is the author of Young Malawian Puritans (Utrecht, ISOR Press 1993) and has co-edited with Richard Fardon and Wim van Binsbergen, Modernity on a Shoestring (London, SOAS, Leiden, ASC, 1999) and with Ria Reis and Marja Spierenburg, The Quest for Fruition (James Currey, 2000). Recently he co-edited with Mirjam de Bruijn and Dick Foeken, Mobile Africa. Changing Patterns of Movement in Africa and Beyond (Leiden, Brill, 2001). This book features one of his main research-interests, which is the relationship between Pentecostalism, transnationalism and migration. This is the topic of a number of his most recent publications, such as ‘Time and Transcultural Technologies of the Self in the Ghanaian Pentecostal Diaspora’ (in: A. Corten & R. Marshall-Fratani (eds). Between Babel and Pentecost. Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America (London, Hurst, 2001). His current research focuses on the diasporic spread of Ghanaian Pentecostalism to other parts of the world, notably the Netherlands and most recently Botswana.

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