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## **Ghanaian churches in the Netherlands: religion mediating a tense relationship**

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# 8. Ghanaian churches in the Netherlands

## *Religion mediating a tense relationship*

### **Introduction**

For decades, Ghanaians have formed a substantial immigrant community in the Netherlands, but only since 2000 has the Ministry of Home Affairs begun to consider the option of granting Ghanaians the formal status of a 'recognized minority'. However trivial this issue might appear in the eyes of the general public, it nevertheless marks the start of a new episode for Ghanaians living in the Netherlands. Whereas the previous period was dominated by concerns over (illegal) immigration of Ghanaians and the faltering measures to control that influx, new policies with regard to the major Dutch cities ('Grote Steden-beleid') are causing a change in perspective. It is now acknowledged that in addition to the established, large minorities – Chinese, Indonesian, Moroccan, Turkish and Surinamese – other and generally much smaller minorities have come to stay. As a recognized minority, the immigrants concerned are entitled to policy measures geared towards their specific needs. Hence, we are witnessing a major shift from control and exclusion to policies of inclusion and care as far as the Ghanaian migrants' predicament is concerned.

Despite these shifts in policy, the tense relationship between the Dutch state and the Ghanaian community, specifically where the Ghanaian identity documents are concerned, still persists. Not only is Ghanaian life in the Netherlands generally marked by a high level of suspicion with regard to the Dutch state, but the migrant community itself has long taken over certain functions that are otherwise provided by the state. In a recent report, Nimako (2000) has labelled this phenomenon 'Emancipation by self-reliance' ('Emancipatie op eigen kracht'). He stresses the fact that the Ghanaian community

has constructed its own place in the Netherlands without an extensive reliance on the public goods of this society. In addition, the measures taken by the Dutch government with regard to Ghanaian immigration and the control and investigations of Ghanaian identities – which extend into Ghana itself – have recently been tightened.

This chapter explores the various dimensions of this tense relationship. It pays specific attention to the many Ghanaian churches that have emerged in the Netherlands and the role they play in the creation of a notion of self-reliance and self-esteem. There is some evidence to suggest that religious structures in Ghana have a history of antagonism with regard to state policies. This feature seems to have been carried over into the Netherlands. The Ghanaian churches escape overt attention by the Dutch government, do not take part in the formal contacts between the government and Ghanaian interest groups and societies, and hardly take part in the formal structures of Dutch religious life and its various church bodies. The moral authority they represent within the Ghanaian community is a distinctive one.

The first section is devoted to aspects of the Ghanaian immigration itself, while the second section deals with the position of these churches within the migrant community. What has been the role of these churches with regard to Dutch identity politics and present changes in its policies?

### **Ghanaian immigration**

Since the early 1970s a massive overseas migration has occurred of Ghanaians seeking 'greener pastures' in Europe and the United States. This migration occurred in two waves, starting around 1973 when Ghana experienced the effects of the

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*Page 88: Ladies' choir*  
*Mariama at the*  
*Begijnhof church in*  
*Amsterdam.*

*Photo Angèle Etoundi Essamba.*

oil crisis, followed by a new wave around 1981 when the coup by flight lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings added political upheaval to a deepening economic crisis. Migration initially focused on the West African region itself, Nigeria in particular. When economic and political conditions deteriorated, Ghanaian migration in the late 1970s started to focus on prosperous European countries such as Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. Sizeable communities of Ghanaian migrants developed in London, Hamburg and Amsterdam. In 1995 it was estimated that more than 12 per cent of the entire Ghanaian population was living abroad (Peil 1995: 345), and that after cocoa and gold, migrant remittances had become the third main source of income in Ghana.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, Ghanaian politicians have been aware that the Ghanaian diaspora is vital to Ghana's survival in the world economy of today. The frequent visits by Ghanaian political leaders to Ghanaian communities abroad have underscored the importance of this economic umbilical cord.

The Ghanaian community in the Netherlands comprises both first and second generation migrants. In his recent report, Nimako (2000) provides detailed data on the composition of the community, and indicates that of the nearly 13,000 officially registered 'ethnic' Ghanaians (1998), 22 per cent belong to the second generation, having been born in the Netherlands. Moreover, 56 per cent of the first generation migrants have adopted Dutch nationality. Therefore, a total of 78 per cent of officially registered Ghanaians have become fully 'Dutch' in terms of their citizenship, as it is common that these children born in the Netherlands are granted Dutch nationality.

The Ghanaian community is quite young. Migrants were and are mostly young men and women, usually around their mid-twenties. Many aspired to establish a family and therefore began exploring ways of marrying partners from Ghana. Young families settled from the early 1990s onward and the second generation of Ghanaians, born from Ghanaian parents in the Netherlands, is therefore now in the age group up to about

nine years of age. With middle-aged or even older Ghanaians numbering only a few, the Ghanaian migrant community is young and dynamic, marked by high labour productivity and eager to 'make it' in life. The rise of this energetic community has caught the attention of scholars, students and policy makers concerned with the position of minorities in Dutch society. Of all the Sub-Saharan African minorities, the Ghanaians are by far the most researched and best described. Reports deal with statistics, population, coping strategies, home ties, religion, gender and health, the colourful cultural expressions of the Ghanaian community and its relative success in overcoming the hardships of adaptation and integration. The 'Profile', published by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2001, concludes that Ghanaians by and large are well-integrated in the Netherlands. Employment is not really an issue of great concern as many Ghanaians even have multiple jobs, impoverishment is not a haunting problem, whereas the language barrier (many speak only English and Twi) is only felt when people wish to apply for higher ranking, qualified jobs. There is a disparity between their overall level of education in comparison with the unskilled or semi-skilled jobs Ghanaians hold, but because of their age many still see possibilities for improvement by enhancement of their language skills.

With a few noticeable exceptions, most of these studies have difficulties in grappling with the issue of illegal or undocumented immigration. Over the past two decades, the Dutch government has developed policies to curb the influx of what it perceived as mainly 'undocumented' and therefore illegal labour migrants. In a strange way the influx of illegal Ghanaian migrants has coincided with the efforts by the government to establish what Rouse has called a taxonomic state: an increasing use of censusing and mapping, the growing emphasis on the registration of births, marriages and deaths, the history of the passport, the identity card and fingerprinting... (Rouse 1995: 362)

1. Personal communication, Dr B. Agyeman-Duah, Institute of Economic Affairs, Ghana (October 1998).

## Dutch suspicions

Particularly towards the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, Africa came to figure as a 'force' largely responsible for undercutting the taxonomic efforts of the Dutch state, which had developed various techniques to control access to the common goods of its welfare society. In the early 1980s the so-called SoFi-number was introduced, a fiscal code given by the Dutch state to every resident at the moment of birth. This made it possible to keep a record of a person's income, tax-pay status, and use of social security benefit schemes throughout their life. This taxonomy was particularly meant to prevent illegal access to the common goods of the Dutch social benefit schemes.

One of the problems that surfaced, however, was that records on the population, particularly in the larger cities, showed many gaps. Identities were not fully known, could not be fully tracked or had escaped supervision. This came to be known as 'statistical dirt' ('vervuiling') in the population registration: records and statistics on the nation-state's subjects were not 'clean', 'consistent' and 'compatible'. From the 1980s on, a widely shared, public concern with 'illegality' ('het illegalen-vraagstuk') was born. Wild guesses began circulating in Dutch politics with regard to the total size of the illegal labour migrant population and the extent of the 'damage' done to the Dutch economy, labour market and the social services apparatus.

As public alarm was growing about the 'volume' of illegal aliens, and premised on the idea that one's identity is inseparably tied to one name and to one number, Dutch civil servants in the big cities began complaining bitterly about the strange identities, often considered 'fraudulent', that were discovered in their records and statistics. Since the late 1980s this concern has focused predominantly on the documents belonging to Ghanaians and Nigerians. When I interviewed civil servants in The Hague they revealed that in the years between 1992 and 1996 those dealing with Ghanaian and Nigerian identity-documents would consider *a priori*

almost 100 per cent of these to be fraudulent, forged or otherwise incorrect. The crash of the Israeli plane into the Amsterdam Bijlmer area in 1992, causing over 40 deaths in a blazing fire, stirred public concern about the possible size of the Ghanaian population as numbers of them went missing. Police officials initiated a public debate about the numbers of illegal Ghanaians supposedly living in such low-cost housing areas, now assuming a link between the numbers of illegal Ghanaians and the crime rate. In contrast with other ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, this provoked disproportionate concern for the West African community on the part of Dutch officials. It was soon estimated that the number of 'undocumented' West Africans was likely to be double if not triple the official figures (Van den Broek 1992).

The Dutch government introduced laws aimed at curtailing illegal immigration with the hope of enhancing the state's effectiveness in supervising civil society. These laws sought to prohibit contract marriages ('Wet Schijnhuwelijken'), thereby limiting the use of marriage as a way of gaining entry into Dutch society. Another law made it obligatory to be able to prove one's identity whenever asked at one's place of work ('Wet Identificatieplicht') and a law called the 'Koppelingswet' provided for the connecting of a range of different databases which each contain highly private, personal information on Dutch residents. Through their interconnection, this legislation will increase the visibility of those who have thus far escaped through the loopholes and inconsistencies of the various data systems, finding ways to reside and work in the Netherlands on an illegal basis.

These laws were also introduced in order to enable further research into the supposed relationship between illegality and criminality (Staring et al. 1998, Van der Leun 1998). In 1994 a special parliamentary commission of enquiry was established aimed at reviewing police methods of investigating criminal organizations in the Netherlands (the Van Traa parliamentary commission). An entire chapter of its report was devoted

to the Nigerian and Ghanaian involvement in criminal organizations and their intertwined relations in such activities. Although criminal activities among Ghanaians and Nigerians appear to be limited to a few domains (drug trafficking, car theft and trafficking in women for the prostitution business), these activities involved the supplying of identity papers and other documents (a type of activity known as 'making papers') for which they have become particularly well known. It is because of the taxonomic nature of the Dutch state that this activity was perceived as undermining its very basis. In other words, fraudulence with documents now began to be regarded as a serious crime.

This trend culminated in 1996 with the publication of yet another government ruling that came to be known as the 'Probleemlanden circulaire' (the circular letter on problem countries, April, 1996). This circular blacklisted five countries as having a notorious record concerning the production of fraudulent identity documents. At the top of this list was Ghana followed by Nigeria, India, Pakistan and the Dominican Republic.

For the first time, the Dutch government stated that it had no confidence in the capability of these five governments to control the flow and authenticity of identity documents. On top of the normal procedures related to migration and documents, another instrument would be added to controlling and checking identities. This instrument is called 'verification' ('verificatie'). It basically implies that for any identity document required of Ghanaians and Nigerians in the Netherlands (passport, marriage certificate, birth certificate, etc.), the Dutch government is entitled to investigate the person's identity in the country of origin. In practice it meant that as of 1996 the Dutch embassies in both countries stepped up their investigation of antecedents of any person applying for visa or residence permits, or for the adoption of the Dutch nationality. Such investigations carried out by Dutch officials in Ghana, usually with the help of local informants and detectives, involve the interrogation of relatives,

friends and colleagues, and researching schools, churches and hospitals for any further bit of information on the person. Only after the full verification of the person's identity is completed can documents be assessed and stamped as being 'verified'. In other words, any Ghanaian person hoping to settle in the Netherlands or anticipating to marry within the Netherlands knows in advance that permission to do so will only be obtained after a full and costly investigation of his or her private life in the country of origin.

Enormous difficulties with this verification procedure have arisen. Many Ghanaians have complained about the fact that in Ghana birth records are often missing or simply non-existent, that names are spelled differently or have been changed during the course of one's life, that dates and places of birth, of residence, of marriage, etc., are often not recorded, and that schools, churches and hospitals often have lost their records due to lack of funds for proper storage. Some have also indicated that families are often divided among themselves due to conflicts and rivalries, resulting in an unwillingness to give information or in deliberate distortions. It has even been suggested that local detectives have been bribed to give details or to mislead the investigation and so on.

### **A blow to Ghanaian dignity**

The impact of this procedure on the Ghanaian migrant community has been devastating. Many of the migrants had hoped to be able to marry prospective partners in Ghana and bring their spouses to the Netherlands, a trajectory which has now become virtually impossible as all sorts of 'verified' documents are requested which have proven to be very hard to come by (birth, marriage or bachelor certificates). The questioning by local detectives of relatives, friends, church leaders and others about personal identities has become a nightmare as it gives way to confusion, dealings, intimidation, family rivalries, suspicion and so forth. Monies paid for documents for the services of local civil servants often vanish. The latest verification questionnaire that any Ghana-



ian applicant has to fill out now contains over 25 question sections that relate even to uncles, aunts, half-brothers, half-sisters and grandparents back home in Ghana, a task almost impossible to complete and an interference with private life spheres that Ghanaians consider completely inappropriate in cultural terms.

When the effects of the verification procedure became felt, Ghanaian interest groups presented a petition to the Dutch parliament in 1998 including reports on a number of cases in which, for unclear reasons, verification had failed. The report, although supported by legal rights groups and lawyers in the Netherlands, effected little change in the situation. In 1999 this was followed by an official complaint filed with the Ghanaian government against the Dutch government and their treatment of such and similar cases. While interest groups in the Netherlands

began organizing their collaborative protests against these measures, in Accra the prizes for forged documents were skyrocketing (for Accra see De Thouars 1999). So-called 'paper-boys' and 'connection-men' increased their prices for forged passports, visas or any other type of required documents to unprecedented levels.

Within the Ghanaian community these measures were increasingly being felt as insulting and as a new feature of late postcolonial and highly unequal state relations. The Netherlands' authorities' investigations of citizens' identities on the territory of another state is a telling sign of this inequality and was felt as a blow to Ghanaian dignity and self-esteem. Ghana's and Nigeria's weaker systems of civil administration, both in the present and in the past, act in that sense against their own territorial integrity. They have been forced to allow investigations of the

*The Ghanaian church community Resurrection Power and Living Bread Ministries in the Egeldonk car park in Amsterdam.*

*Photo Angèle Etoundi Essamba.*

identities of their citizens by another, more strongly organized state. From the perspective of Dutch officials, this entire exercise is a reaction to the failure of previous attempts to tighten access.

The Dutch state wants to supervise the state's perimeters and to curb migration from Africa (and the rest of the non-Western world for that matter). Economic migrants are considered parasitic to its wealth and resources. West African immigration in particular sent shock waves through the Dutch system, demonstrating that access control was far from watertight. The porous system offered many loopholes for taking up illegal residence and gaining illegal access to social benefit schemes and the like. Above all, many began to realize that a system based on the creation of external memory for the identification of persons, in terms of a paper-based bureaucratic control of identity as opposed to a social memory of such identities, is the result of a specific and certainly not universal cultural rationale. It is particularly in West Africa (though not exclusively so), where the social memory of names and identities is so important, that the confrontation between cultural rationales in establishing identities became so pertinent.

It is in the context of this tightening of immigration laws that the number of Ghanaian Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands rapidly began to increase. Although this growth at first sight could be interpreted as coincidental, the question arises how these churches have helped to mitigate the impact of Dutch identity politics on the Ghanaian community.

### **Ghanaian Pentecostalism and the quest for respect and self-esteem**

While Ghanaian identity in the Netherlands began to be criminalized during the late 1980s, various Ghanaian migrant communities witnessed the emergence and proliferation of many Pentecostal churches. Elsewhere I have described the interplay between migration from Ghana and the growth of Pentecostalism, as one of the most popular forms of Christianity in Ghana (Van Dijk 2000, 2001).

The Ghanaian Pentecostal churches that then emerged, particularly in the big cities, were either branches of similar churches in Ghana or newly established within the migrant community itself. A more recent development is the 're-migration' of these churches from the Netherlands back to Ghana.

Pentecostalism is a brand of revivalist Christianity with profound roots in black American communities. From the United States, this faith started spreading to other parts of the world around 1910-1920. It is marked by charismatic inspiration through the Holy Spirit, by which ecstasy, speaking in tongues and various forms of faith healing become available to the believer. It is also distinguished by its emphasis on strict moral codes and its ideologies relating to the material well being of its members, sometimes mockingly called the 'prosperity gospel'. Much more should also be said about the personalism surrounding the leader-founders of the vast number of churches, the sense of individualism that they propagate and the critical attitudes they adopt vis-à-vis various forms of traditional cultural life. As many authors have argued, Pentecostalism is very much a faith within modernity, and much of its present appeal in African countries such as Ghana can be understood on that basis.

In Ghana this popularity has acquired unprecedented proportions. Particularly in the urban centres many young, upwardly mobile urbanites are fascinated by the Pentecostals, who are highly visible and audible in the public domain. They are particularly successful in accessing or controlling the media and thus are able to make their (moral) messages heard in practically every corner of society. This message propounds the establishment of a Christian nation and a morally rejuvenated society. While the churches on the one hand provide prayer services for the spiritual benevolence and the success and prosperity of every individual believer, they also provide a new idiom of power on a higher level of social and political life. Central concerns are how Africa – and Ghana in particular – can earn a respected

place in today's world community, and how dignity, pride and self-esteem can be re-established by getting rid of all evil and ancestral relations that tie the country to its past. The state is morally untrustworthy and politics a matter of great spiritual danger, whereas the nation must be liberated from the evil authorities that rule it. While the old and established missionary churches are condemned as preaching a gospel that teaches that there is bliss in being poor, most Pentecostal churches pursue (religious) entrepreneurship and urge their members to dress according to the latest fashions and styles. Displays of prosperity are welcomed as signs that God is with those who are economically active and independent. In Ghana, membership in the Pentecostal churches therefore comprises primarily the emergent middle classes, whose wealth is demonstrated through enormous donations of money. The services provided by these churches, such as marriages, funerals and birthing rituals, have turned into matters of prestige. It is in these Christianized rituals that the 'old' society and its traditional customs can be left behind and an embarrassing past of ancestor worship, 'superstition' and 'ignorance' can be critically engaged.

A church such as the large Church of Pentecost International has established congregations in over 40 countries around the world. As a consequence of the trans-nationalization of Pentecostalism there are now over 40 different Ghanaian Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands. While these churches often have thousands of members in Ghana, here in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe membership usually numbers somewhere between 250 to 500 adults. Many of these churches relate as closely to African cosmological notions as their predecessors do in Ghana. This means that concepts of spiritual protection, healing and deliverance from evil are considered as important for the true Ghanaian Pentecostal believer in the Netherlands as they are back home in Ghana.

This principle also applies to the issue of Ghanaian dignity and self-esteem in a globalizing

world. For a long time, the Ghanaian migrant community did not have organizations that would be able to make statements about the moral life of the community. Neither did it have clear-cut forms of social authority that could 'rescue' (as one informant explained to me) or safeguard dignity, respect and self-esteem in times of culturally important life-crisis rituals. Of particular relevance are the elaborate funeral arrangements. If these rituals are not observed properly, the social prestige and esteem of an entire family might be jeopardized. The Dutch government could not fill this void, while during the 1980s the small and emergent interest groups such as RECOGIN or Sikaman were not in a position to take up these roles. In other words, there was a need for moral authority, for a system and a setting that could preserve common notions of dignity, both with regard to the situation in the host society as well as with regard to the Ghanaians' 'own' cultural norms and feelings. Most Ghanaian migrants had been forced to accept menial work, ranging from fish-processing to cleaning jobs. These types of jobs are often held in contempt by Dutch citizens, but they are also looked down on by the emergent middle class groups for whom Pentecostalism holds an appeal. The stiffening Dutch identity policies that occasionally resulted in police 'razzias', as they were called, only aggravated the dominant feelings of loss, embarrassment and social shame (most particularly in cases where arrest by the police resulted in deportation back to Ghana, which often led to a humiliating confrontation with the family). The verification procedures only served to worsen this situation. These intrusions into the private life of the applicant demonstrated that any outside power could reach into the very heart of family life, of kinship relations and such sensitive issues as marriages, birth and citizenship in even the most remote places in Ghana, and that nothing could be done about it. All these developments ran counter to a deeply felt sentiment that migration must create respected 'big men' and 'big madams': people who had been able to 'make it in the

West', who had earned the social esteem of being able to build a 'mansion' in one of the suburbs of Accra or Kumasi and who would therefore have every right to claim a prominent place with his or her kinship relations.

The unprecedented growth of the Pentecostal churches in terms of numbers and membership coincided with these developments. The churches took on crucial roles with regard to the arrangement of funerals and marriages, and provided reliable channels of communication with Ghana – an important service in view of all the enquiries that Dutch officials wanted to make about identities. Even more important, however, was the atmosphere of prestige, pride and self-esteem offered by these churches. Ostentation became part of the church meetings, fashion and style became crucial elements of the outfit of the true believer and monetary donations the reciprocal wheel that kept the community going as a way of self-help and as a mode for displaying success and prosperity. Furthermore, the churches filled many functions and positions of authority in one form or the other (prayer leader, choir leader, president of men's, women's, youth fellowships, masters of ceremonies, chair of funeral fund and so on) so that ample channels of social esteem were created.

In short, what Ghanaian men and women lacked in the outside world is being created inside the church community. In this new moral order no questions are asked concerning a person's identity in taxonomic terms – that is, a person as a 'state-constructed' individual. Instead, questions are asked concerning an individual's moral standing in life, which is largely determined by his or her spiritual strength and social behaviour. In 'saving one's soul', the person is not cut off from his or her social environment. In Pentecostal ritual the person is regarded as the product of that family and community. It is that community which needs Christianizing to purge it from any evil influences. The Pentecostal churches thus replace the ancestral community with a new one, one in which the church leader often takes the position

as the new 'abusua panyin', the family head, who at all times is responsible for the proper execution of marriage, funeral or other important rituals. Whereas the Dutch state is utterly untrustworthy and Dutch society is held in contempt because of its permissiveness in moral terms, the churches have vied to establish a kind of community where aspirations for respect, esteem and authority have found an expression. Sadly, it has to be noted that some of these churches themselves have become embroiled in internal leadership struggles that sometimes have led to a breakdown in trust and to splits in communities and congregations.

Since the turn of the century, the churches have begun to face competition from associations formed on an ethnic basis, the so-called 'kuos'. These ethnic associations provide another, although much more restricted setting, where the identity politics of the Dutch state are mitigated and issues of respect and esteem are lived out in a different way. These associations establish kings ('ohene') and queen-mothers ('ohem maa') as the symbolic carriers of an identity that resists being encapsulated by the state. Although in this sense they occupy a position similar to that of the Pentecostal churches, they have a limited role to play when it comes to the life-crisis domains such as birth, death and marriage. It is therefore to be expected that the moral authority assumed by the Pentecostal churches will for the time being remain significant as a counterpoint to any other authority Ghanaians happen to meet while living in the diaspora.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has investigated the changing policies of the Dutch government vis-à-vis immigrant minorities. While previously the Ghanaian minority was primarily the concern of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Justice, now the Ministry of Home Affairs seems to have taken an interest in enhancing the position of 'small minorities'. The Dutch state has come to realize that these minorities have come to stay

and that therefore attention needs to be focused on the make-up of the local multicultural social fabric in the big cities. These policies, however, are likely to be handicapped by a lack of understanding of the cultural, moral and religious idiom used by this community in positioning itself within Dutch society.

State policies are caught in a contradiction. While aspiring to promote the integration of the Ghanaian minority, the state's taxonomic identity politics run counter to these efforts. As a result, the Ghanaian community remains suspicious of the state altogether. Cultural and moral forms of authority have emerged within the community, manifested notably by the Pentecostal churches, which in the eyes of the Dutch state cannot act as its interlocutor. Dutch policies are guided by the principle of strict separation of church and state. Despite the Pentecostal churches' moral authority, they can therefore not be 'targeted' as the facilitators of 'integration'. The role of these churches as mediators in the tense relationship created by the Dutch state through its identity politics, and as actors in carving out a profitable place for the Ghanaian community as whole, has been insufficiently recognized. The Pentecostal churches deserve full recognition for their role in helping Ghanaians overcome some of the effects of this tense relationship by preserving a sense of prestige and moral status on their own terms.

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