The issue of immigration is one of the hot issues in the Dutch public sphere. Until the nineties reference to problems related to immigration was considered politically incorrect, but recently it has become one of the main topics of discussion. One important focus is the issue of illegal immigration. In the Netherlands live between 50,000 and 200,000 undocumented immigrants (Edeveen et al., 2005; Engbersen et al., 2002; Tinnemans, 2005). African churches are directly involved in this issue. Although no reliable statistical data is available, experts in the field estimate that 30 percent of the members of these churches does not have proper papers for legal residence. The main question I want to explore in this article is what position African churches have in the debate on illegal immigration in the public sphere. Do African churches participate in discussions on the subject? What is their view on illegal migration? What is the value of their contribution to the debate?

To answer my research questions I need to describe the general discussion on the issue of illegal immigration. It is nearly impossible to give a detailed overview of the whole discussion within the scope of this article, so I will limit myself to a summary of the debate in the major Dutch public media of the last two years. For this summary I have used several online sources, such as the Krantenbank¹, the proceedings of the chambers of Parliament, and (radio-)documentaries available at uitzendinggemist.nl². The discussions in these media are reasonably representative of the whole debate. After this exposition I will present the position of African churches. The material for this presentation is based on interviews I held with pastors of African churches, all but one living in the Amsterdam area. I also use interview material from other sources, such as news papers. Furthermore, I have interviewed experts in the field, such as representatives from the Voedselbank (“Foodbank”), pastor G. Timmermans who is connected with the Afrikahuis (“Africa House”, an organisation for African Roman Catholic Christians), and workers of the IOM Netherlands, a non-governmental organisation helping migrants to return to their home country. The religious backgrounds of the respondents are diverse: Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal. In this article I have deliberately chosen to focus on persons who are active in the public sphere, although preliminary findings of the research project “The Participation of Immigrant Churches in Dutch Civil Society”³ suggest that not many African churches participate in the public sphere (De Vries, 2006). Problems of survival, such as finding and funding a place of worship, a theology that focuses on personal piety, and the fact that many venues to participation are already occupied by the ‘established’ churches seem to hinder a public presence of African churches. A research that focuses on a-typical participants may not be representative for all African churches; my aim is not to be comprehensive but to give insight in the how of participating in the public sphere. One last methodological caveat: to keep things simple I often use African churches as if this is a uniform group, although of course there are many differing views on the issue between churches and even within churches.

¹ An online and searchable repository of all articles of the major Dutch newspapers: AD / Algemeen Dagblad, Eindhovens Dagblad, Fem Business, Het Financieele Dagblad, AD / Haagsche Courant, NRC Handelsblad, Het Parool, De Telegraaf, Trouw and De Volkskrant

² An online repository of many programs that have been broadcasted by the Dutch public broadcasting companies.

³ See for more information on the research project http://www.immigrantchurches.nl


Marten van der Meulen

**Concepts**

Public participation means participation in the project of the Dutch society of “coming to a common mind” (Taylor, 2004; 1995). This process takes places in the public sphere, the place were participants publicly discuss ideas and practices, for example in newspapers and other media.

The adjectives ‘undocumented’ and ‘illegal’ have the same meaning, but ‘undocumented’ will be used in this article. ‘Illegal’ suggests that having no legal papers for residence is a criminal activity, which is not yet the case in the Netherlands. The exception is ‘illegal immigration’ for ‘undocumented immigration’ is an uncommon phrase.

**Illegal immigration**

Illegal immigration is often thought as a singular, uniform phenomenon. In reality, a number of different ways of being illegal are possible. Some people do not have the right papers to stay in the Netherlands, e.g. people who came on a tourist visa and who stayed after the expiration date. Others are allowed to stay, but not to work, e.g. people who work while their tourist visa is valid. Of course there are people who are neither allowed to stay or work. Engbersen et al. (2002) distinguish three waves of immigration: (1) the immigration of Turkish and Moroccan ‘guest workers’ in the fifties, sixties and seventies of the 20th century, (2) the asylum migration in the eighties and nineties, and (3) the recent work migration, mostly from Middle and Eastern Europe and Africa. All three waves have their illegal counterparts, e.g. asylum seekers who stay after their request for asylum is rejected, or workers from new European Union countries who take jobs in areas of work they are not allowed to work in. Most of the African undocumented migrants belong to the third wave. They have come to the Netherlands from the nineties onwards, and are often not eligible for asylum requests because their home countries are considered safe. The majority of Dutch Africans come from West Africa, especially Ghana.

Illegal immigration has become an issue in the early nineties. Earlier, the existence of illegal residents was largely ignored. Illegal work was treated mildly: up to 1991 it was possible for undocumented immigrants to receive a fiscal number and to work (more or less) legally, although their stay was illegal. During the nineties people began to realise that a large number of immigrant workers were not going back to their country of origin. Gradually the immigration laws became increasingly firm. In the same process, illegal immigration came to be seen as a problem, as Van der Leun observed: “At first, people were seen as spontaneous labourers and now they are more and more perceived as people who breach the laws and are also associated with crime.” (in: Bakker, 2005).

**Survival**

Although the strict laws make life for undocumented immigrants more difficult, a number of resources are available to the undocumented, such as family support: relatives help undocumented migrants find housing, work, food etc. Usually the presence of family is the major reason to go to a certain country. Often the family in the country of destination is the initiator and financial supporter of the migration process. Ethnic networks, such as ethnic churches, are another source of support. There are several indications that African churches are an important part of the survival networks of undocumented immigrants from Africa. Experts in the field estimate that 30 percent of the members of African churches are undocumented, although this figure can vary greatly from church to church. Some churches see helping undocumented Africans as an important part of their mission, and may have a much higher percentage of undocumented members. The percentage also varies from time to
time. African immigrants travel a lot between European Union countries: they go where the prospects for finding jobs and legal papers are best\(^4\).

African churches provide undocumented immigrants with various forms of support. Sometimes church buildings are used as sleeping places, but more often congregations function as a place to find people who are willing to provide housing for an undocumented immigrant. African churches are concentrations of capital, providing documented and undocumented immigrants with information on and access to job opportunities. African churches also function as an in-between space: a place situated between the old and the new home that recreates the life that the immigrant has left, a ‘home away from home’. As such it serves as a site for “establishing alternative identities” (Guest, 2003). In the church someone who in day to day life is an anonymous illegal can be a respected member or even leader of a community.

The public discussion on undocumented immigrants

Broadly speaking two opposed views in the public debate on illegal immigration exist. The first position is what I call the ‘procedural approach’. The goal in this approach is to carry out the rules in a fair but strict manner. Illegal immigration is seen as a criminal activity that has to be battled with a firm policy of tracking undocumented immigrants, making life difficult for them by cutting access to resources (e.g. schooling, health care) and sending undocumented immigrants as soon as possible back to the country of origin. This approach usually couples immigration to integration. New immigrants in the Netherlands need to integrate in Dutch society: they need to learn the language and habits of its native residents. This focus on integration produces a specific interpretation of immigration as a process of long lasting settlement in a new country. Illegal immigration in this context is seen as extra undesirable as undocumented immigrants are temporary residents who lack an incentive to integrate.

Rita Verdonk, the former Dutch minister of Immigration and Integration (2003 – 2006), is a typical maybe even iconic example of the procedural approach. She herself described her approach as a “rules are rules” approach. In an opinion article in *de Volkskrant* she makes clear that illegal immigration is a threat to European society. In line with many other European policy makers (cf. Munster, 2004) she couples illegal immigration to terrorism. The terrorist attacks on New York and Madrid force the need for a strict immigration policy:

… there are two requirements that may not be altered: the necessity to safeguard security and to further develop the European values. Since 9/11 and Madrid security is a main concern. This means that illegal immigration must be tackled even harder. (Verdonk, 2004)

The second position is what I call the ‘humanitarian approach’. Illegal immigration is seen as an unwanted but unavoidable by-product of international immigration movements which are caused by the relative ease of global travelling and great differences in wealth. This approach stresses the positive consequences of immigration: immigrants are needed to compensate for the aging of Europe’s population, they do the jobs that the natives no longer want to do, and the remittances which the immigrants send home are a kind of developmental aid that saves Europe from a lot of international problems. Proponents of this approach propose a more lax attitude to undocumented immigrants. Offering more opportunities for work immigration, such as a Green Card system, is seen as a solution for the problem of undocumented immigrants. Proponents of this approach criticize the procedural approach for

\(^4\)In 2005 – 2006 Spain was a favorite place to go. Many also move to Great Britain, where one nowadays can find a sizable Dutch speaking Somali community.
being to rigid. The situation of undocumented immigrants is too complicated to do justice with a strict interpretation of the rules. Although the methods may be illegal, the motives of many immigrants are honourable: they are ‘people trying to make the best of their lives’, who flee poverty in order to find a better life in Europe. Enforcing the law may in many cases entail greater injustice. A typical remark by Willem Aantjes, a former politician and well know publicist:

Rules are rules, but they must be implemented knowing that the greatest justice can lead to the greatest injustice when rigidly enforced. The letter kills, but the spirit gives life. This spirit is the centre, the spirit from which rules are made and put into practice. (Aantjes, 2006)

Usually both approaches are not discussed in abstract, but surface at discussions on specific issues. Some issues received special attention by the African churches. These were the discussion on a general pardon for 26,000 asylum seekers, the financial bonus that the police receives for every undocumented immigrant they catch, the comparison of the immigration policy with the way the Jews were treated during World War II by a member of Parliament, and the treatment of undocumented immigrants in detention centres, especially the keeping of children in captivity. These issues were discussed in African churches even before they became an issue in the public debate.

**African churches and the public sphere**

The African churches I studied fit in the humanitarian approach. When asked on the subject, they oppose the strict policy towards undocumented immigrants and propose a more lenient, ‘humane’ approach. Western countries should share their riches with the world and offer people who are willing to work the opportunity to do so. Reverend Marfo, who is the minister of the Pentecostal church “House of Fellowship” and who is strongly involved in the issue of illegality, says the following:

If people are working well and paying tax and looking after their family, then on the basis of their work they should be given a final status. … that will be good for the nation and good for the people concerned. (Rev. Tom Marfo, in: Bakker, 2005)

Africans usually do not attach the same weight to papers as native Dutch people do: legal papers cannot define who you are and whether you have the right to stay. Gerard Timmermans, a Dutch Roman Catholic priest who works for the Afrikahuis, described the African attitude towards residence permits as: “Being illegal is for Africans like having no fishing permit for the Dutch.” Many Dutch do not think that fishing without permit is a big evil. A fishing permit is something you buy mainly to avoid getting problems with the police when checked. Africans follow the same reasoning: not having the right residence papers is a practical problem, not a moral one.

The African churches use theological sources to support their plea for a humanitarian approach. They acknowledge the ‘God-given’ right of a government to control who may go into the country, but they also think that the Bible offers directions as to how governments should treat the people within its borders. Reverend Amoah of the Wesley Methodist Church states that the Dutch government should “share their riches” and leave “grain at the field” (Ruth 2:2) that can be picked up by poor immigrants. Thus, Amoah continues: “The Dutch have every right to secure their border, but please, they should have a humanitarian approach, a kind attitude towards their fellow human beings.”

That Amoah quotes from the book of Ruth is no coincidence: the story is about the poor immigrant Ruth and serves as an exemplary humanitarian policy to immigrants that the Dutch government should adopt. Some pastors also quote Matt. 25 (about the feeding of the
hungry and the visiting of imprisoned people) to stress that providing basic care even for the “least important people” is at the heart of the gospel. Another theological argument used is the idea that God is beyond human borders. According to Reverend Dube of the African Episcopal Methodist Church “the children of God are never and nowhere illegal”, (“Dominee Msizi Dube,” 2006) meaning that illegality is a construction that is alien to the mind of God.

Many African pastors are very critical about how the police try to find undocumented immigrants. They have first hand experience of how policy decisions work out in practice for undocumented immigrants. In the churches one can hear stories about Africans who fleeing from the police jumped of balconies and got injured. Pastor Marfo calls the “raids” on undocumented “evil attacks”. The treatment of undocumented immigrants after they have been caught also receives strong criticisms: some pastors even call the detention centres (the official name for places where undocumented immigrants are kept) “deportation centres”. They deliberately refer to the way the Jews were treated during World War II, in a similar manner as the Dutch Member of Parliament I mentioned before. Some native Dutch churches are also critical of the immigration policies of the government, but according to Rev. Dube, these churches have come too close to the government and have left their critical distance. He says: “As churches and supporting groups, we’ve become dependent on the government. We’ve become paralysed. We have to do the things that fit the agenda of the government and thus not use money to help undocumented immigrants.” (“Dominee Msizi Dube,” 2006, 6)

African immigrant churches thus have their own ideas on illegal immigration. But do their ideas and argumentations reach the public sphere? Generally they do not. Although African churches are very tightly connected to the issue, their voice is not often heard in the public debates on illegal immigration. A few African pastors have a strong public profile on this issue, but most of the churches only offer practical, informal help to people in need. The research that I conducted until now, suggest that this limited participation is related to a number of things. First of all, internal circumstances hinder participation by African churches. Many of the churches are very new, consisting of people who have come to the Netherlands only very recently. Even the leaders of these churches often are first generation immigrants. Most of the churches are still busy solving all kinds of practical problems, such as finding decent worship space. They have neither time nor opportunity to participate in the public sphere. Because of their relative short time in the Netherlands it is difficult for Africans – and of course for other immigrants too – to understand the ‘rules of the game’. To really effectively play any game, one needs to know the rules and the other players from inside out. According to one Ghanaian pastor, he and his colleagues often had to take recourse to doing things the ‘Ghanaian way’, as they had insufficient knowledge of the Dutch way. Some African churches furthermore have a theology that makes it difficult to see issues as problems that need to be addressed in public. For example prosperity-gospel, an influential strand of Pentecostalism in African churches, teaches that well being (or the lack thereof) depends on the faith of the individual believer. Poverty and misfortune have to be dealt with prayer and spiritual warfare instead of discussions and media pressure.

A second reason for the limited participation in the public sphere is a consequence of external hindrances. Other participants may simply overlook the existence of African churches, even when they try to take part in the public debate. For example, the media – who are very influential in shaping any public debate – do not often select African pastors as participants in debates on TV or radio. The debating ground already is covered by whole lot of (native Dutch) publicists, NGO’s like Vluchtelingenwerk (“Work for Refugees”), politicians etc. Furthermore, evidence exists that African churches experience intercultural incompetence or even outright racism from Dutch people. For example, in a case study on the building of a church building for Ghanaian churches (Goossen, 2006) the researcher
discovered that the Dutch people involved in the building project (e.g. government officials, advisors, architects) thought very lowly of the intellectual capacities of Africans. This attitude probably still influences the willingness of Dutch participants to open up their debates to input from African churches.

The pastors Marfo and Dube are exceptions to the rule that African pastors do not have a strong public profile. Both are easily found by journalists and give interviews for radio, TV, newspapers, and are in contact with politicians. Marfo repeatedly went to parliament to speak to politicians and once invited a delegation of the Christian democratic members of parliament in his church. That these pastors have a public profile is related to their backgrounds. Marfo received a large part of his education in Great Britain. He is someone “who knows the system from inside out”\(^5\). Dube has a background in South African liberation theology. He is trained to define issues as social structural problems that need to be addressed by changing public policy. Dube and Marfo demonstrate that “knowing how things work” and having the cultural capital to deal with the Dutch context is a prerequisite for an effective public participation. A public profile asks for an investment of time and energy that not all pastors and members of African churches are prepared to give. Some shun public exposure on the issue, because illegal immigration is associated with crime or because they are undocumented themselves. Others have been disappointed, for example a Baptist minister used to give interviews to AT5, the Amsterdam local TV-channel, but stopped doing it after a while “because nothing changed.” Even the most public pastors acknowledge that getting your message abroad can be a difficult and possibly disappointing process.

Conclusions

African churches contribute several valuable elements to the debate. They use moral arguments that are not regularly brought into the debate, such as the biblical instruction “to share the riches”. With a statement like “being illegal is like fishing without permit” they counter the Dutch – Western European axiom that a correct handling of papers and procedures must be the touchstone of a fair policy. But it is not just that Africans have another view of things, they are also uniquely located in the issue of illegal immigration: at the receiving end of immigration policy. Most of the participants in the debate depart from the viewpoint of the established: they argue which policy is best for the people who already are in the Netherlands. African churches argue more from the viewpoint of the outsiders: how do undocumented migrants themselves think about the immigration policies? This is a valuable perspective, for the people who experience the enactment of policies see the problems that a policy produces best. African churches have some serious doubts about the justness of the current immigration policies. Whether they are right is not something we can establish here, but it is clear that they bring in a perspective that should not be ignored.

Although the African churches have something to add to the public debate, it is doubtful whether their contribution fully reaches the public sphere. In theory the public sphere is a place where all participants participate equally, but in practice not every one has equal access. In this case the persons most affected by policy decisions – the undocumented migrants – are the least able to publicly voice their interests. The African churches cannot effectively represent the interests of undocumented migrants either, because of the above mentioned internal and external problems of access to the public sphere. This unequal access threatens the very core of the public sphere: its publicness. This raises the question how the participation of African churches on the debate on illegal immigration and other future debates can be improved.

---

\(^5\) Words from the pastor of another immigrant church
Participants having limited access to the public sphere are a problem of both sides, so to solve it both sides must give and take a little. I once heard an African Baptist minister say in a sermon: “We have to educate ourselves, if we want to be successful in this society”. This is not only true for ‘normal’ education, but also for education in citizenship. African churches cannot ignore the public sphere if they really want to solve some of the problems they encounter. This in particular is the case with illegal immigration. This issue is strongly influenced by policy decisions, so it might be a good idea for African churches to invest in learning how the system works, to try to improve their relations with the media, and to train the skills necessary for public performance. One of the main things the other participants should have is patience. As mentioned, African churches are still young. In the literature it is clear that the age of a church and the numbers of years its membership has lived in the host country is one of the strongest factors influencing participation. With time, churches get embedded in the system. So some problems will solve itself. Another thing participants can do is translation. This idea comes from an article by Jürgen Habermas, Religion in the Public Sphere (2006). Habermas argues that participants in the public sphere have the obligation to try to understand partners who not yet participate fully and to make their viewpoints publicly available. I do not agree with some of the arguments in the article, but Habermas’ point of the obligation of translation I consider very valuable. Some of the hindrances to a really public sphere can only be solved by a cooperative effort of all participants. Patience, translation and education for citizenship are points of departure for a true participation of all perspectives that hopefully will produce an immigration policy which takes into account the whole range of moral considerations surrounding the issue of illegal immigration.

References

---

6 Habermas focuses on the use of religious arguments in the public sphere. He states that religious arguments need translation in order to be generally accessible. I agree with the critique of other scholars, such as Weithman (2002), who don’t think that the religious character of some arguments is a problem. There are many other more important things that hinder full participation, as is exemplified by my research.