The Continuing Importance of the Local. African Churches and the Search for Worship Space in Amsterdam*

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Abstract
This article focuses on the interaction of African churches with the local social, political and religious ecology of Amsterdam Southeast in their search for worship space. It shows the continuing importance of the local, even for such transnational religious movements as African churches. Constructing a worship location confronts the churches with the ‘ingrained orders of social power in the host society’ (Favell 2003). They encountered familiar black – white distinctions, a legion of ‘white helpers’ and a long process of building trust. I argue that African churches use transnational and local strategies. Becoming part of the local is inspired by missionary motives and is related to the character of religious congregations as relatively fixed organisations which nurture a practice of engagement with local society.

Keywords
African churches, migration, Amsterdam, local place, transnationalism

Résumé
Cet article se concentre sur l’interaction des églises africaines avec l’écologie locale au niveau sociale, politique et religieuse du Sud-est d’Amsterdam dans leur recherche de l’espace de culte. Cela démontre l’importance ininterrompue du local, même pour des mouvements religieux transnationaux comme les églises africaines. La construction d’un espace de culte confronte les églises avec « les ordres enracinés du pouvoir social dans la société hôte » (Favell 2003). Ils rencontrent la distinction habituelle entre noir et blanc, une légion d’« aide blanche » et un long processus de construire la confiance.

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Je soutiens que des églises africaines utilisent des stratégies transnationales et locales. Devenir une partie des locaux est inspiré par des motifs de missionnaire et est rapproché du caractère des congrégations religieuses comme les organisations relativement fixes qui élèvent une pratique d’engagement avec la société locale.

Mots-clés
églises africaines, migration, Amsterdam, espace local, transnationalisme

‘All these places have their moments’
(The Beatles, In My Life)

Introduction

When Joshua and the Israelites finally entered the Holy Land they had no difficulties building a place of worship: they took twelve stones out of the river Jordan and built an altar at the first place they put up their camp (see Josh. 4).

African Christians who crossed the oceans and migrated to Amsterdam and The Netherlands, encountered more difficulties when they wanted to build a place to worship. Before the ceremonial first pile could be rammed in the Dutch clay they had to overcome financial difficulties, bureaucratic regulations and language barriers. Afe Adogame (2006: 407) in his overview article describes how African churches meet ‘cultural barriers,’ ‘a lack of space’ and a myriad of other ‘impediments’ when they want to make ‘their voice heard on European soil.’ However, since the end of the 80s many African churches have been established in Amsterdam (see Van Dijk 2002), especially in the southeastern part of the city, which is sometimes nicknamed ‘Little Africa.’ Due to special circumstances there is a great shortage of worship locations in Southeast which makes it difficult for African churches to ‘make their voice heard.’ In this article I describe how African churches acquire worship space and which resources they use. My main thesis is that local resources are crucial for acquiring a position in Southeast. While religious communities of migrants are increasingly – and rightfully so – understood as transnational phenomena, when focusing on the dynamic between African churches and local political structures it becomes very clear that we must not underestimate the importance of the local.

Amsterdam Southeast is an excellent location to research ‘variations in connecting the global and the local’ (Wimmer and Schiller 2002: 323). It is a hub in African transnational networks. Many of its inhabitants ‘take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states.’
Southeast is an open space, penetrated and changed by realities outside its borders. The ‘webs of relationships’ (Kniss and Numrich 2007) the Africans and their churches live in are not bounded by Southeast, but stretch across multiple places around the globe. People, ideas and resources travel between Africa, Amsterdam and other places on the African diaspora map (Van Dijk 2009). The food market in Southeast is one example of this transnational reality. One can find fresh Ghanaian foods there, delivered via the daily plane service between Amsterdam and Accra. Ghanaian Adventists (described by Koning in this issue) residing in the area feel in many ways much closer to their Ghanaian brothers and sisters in other Western European cities than to their Dutch fellow believers in the same city. Their camp meetings take place across Europe with other Ghanaians. Southeast as such has a ‘unique reality for each inhabitant’ (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 15). However, Southeast is not only a transnational sphere. It is equally a ‘particular place’ (Ammerman 1997, Eiesland 2000): a legal, political, religious and social ecosystem, with its own particular local dynamic.

The main starting point for this article comes from an article by Adrian Favell (2003, see also 2006) who analyses the social position of expats in European cities. Favell argues that the transnational power of many immigrants is a ‘transient affair’ in particular if they want to acquire local benefits. Having an internationally acknowledged education or access to global networks does not bring these immigrants political power or good quality housing. However – and this makes his position interesting – Favell also argues that transnational power may become more important if transnational structures develop further. In these structure people can ‘…begin to define their own fields of economic, social and political power; their own forms of distinction to those that have in the modern age always been rooted, contained and firmly embedded in nation state forms of social organization.’ The case study described in this article confirms this basic insight of Favell. If we focus on the dynamic between a migrant congregation and the local political structures, it becomes clear that migrants have difficulties acquiring local benefits, such as good quality worship space. Transnational linkages and resources, while very important for the members of the congregations and the congregations themselves, are usually not very helpful in this domain. The strategy of migrant churches is to invest time, money and energy in this local dynamic. This article describes how several Ghanaian churches chose – whether they were conscious of it or not – a decidedly local strategy. This approach had its drawbacks, as the churches became encapsulated by ‘white helpers’ in a local dynamic they...
couldn’t control. But their choice seems validated as the strategy contributed to what they saw as their mission for society.

This argument about the continuing importance of the local is in itself not very new. Scholars of transnationalism such as Basch et al. (2003) have always stressed the interaction of local and transnational realities. However, with the discovery of transnationalism and the advent of many new studies on the subject, some scholars do seem to forget the local. The hyped language that surrounds some of the research on transnationalism has been criticised by Michael Peter Smith who argues that

…the unbridled celebration of the ‘hybridity’ of transnational subjects serves to erase the fact that no matter how much spatial mobility or border crossing may characterize transnational actors’ household, community, and place-making practices, the actors are still classed, raced, and gendered bodies in motion in specific historical contexts, within certain political formations and spaces. (Smith 2005: 238)

This article attempts to contribute to the debate on transnationalism by describing how the local remains stubbornly powerful in ‘classing’ and ‘racing’ transnational religious organisations. I understand the local as a socially produced geographical unit which, comprising religious, economic and political ideas, structures and actors, has its own particular dynamic. On the one hand I describe how the political and religious ‘power brokers’ of Southeast shape ‘the social spaces in which transmigrants operate’ (ibid.: 243). On the other hand I show how the participation of African churches in the local social political dynamic changes what Southeast is and means.

The article furthermore focuses on the dynamic between transnational organisations and a local political, social and religious ecosystem. Much of the transnationalism research has concentrated on the level of the individual and the family: how the transnational transforms individual lives (Schiller et al. 1995), or how religion facilitates the construction of a ‘subject identity that fits the condition of translocality’ (Van Dijk 1997). There is a large body of literature on how religious congregations offer moral and material support to migrants (e.g. Hunt and Lightly 2001), offer legitimisation (e.g. Adogame 2003), are platforms for negotiations on changing gender roles (e.g. Marquardt 2005) or provide a home away from home (e.g. Guest 2003). My approach is also different from studies that research such functions of organisations by describing what happens within the organisation. A focus on religious organisations and local structures brings to light the field of power African churches become part of, the role of black – white distinctions, and the relatively fixed character of African churches even when the members of these congregations live their fluid and flexible lives across the world.
This article is based on several research methods and moments which I undertook as a postdoctoral fellow in the research project ‘The Participation of Immigrant Churches in Dutch Civil Society’ based at the VU University Amsterdam. During 2005 and 2006 I supervised four students who did a six month pilot project on migrant churches in Amsterdam (published in Dutch, see Euser et al. 2006). During this time I also interviewed several African pastors (see Van der Meulen 2008). In 2007 I did ethnographic fieldwork for a period of six months. I observed and participated in worship services, prayer meetings and other community gatherings, followed the news in papers and other local media. I formally interviewed twenty people involved with the issue of finding worship locations – pastors, civil servants, project leaders, managers of housing associations etc. I also did archival research, in particular on the Candle case and the Lighthouse Chapel controversy. In 2008 I prepared a survey which was carried out in May and June 2008. We interviewed a representative sample of 64 churches, 60% of the total number of churches in Southeast.

Worshipping in Little Africa

In 2007 I visited a Ghanaian Baptist Church. Finding the school the church worshipped in was not difficult, because I could hear the music from far. I only needed to follow my ears. When I neared the building I could see two black men standing in the entrance, holding bibles in their hand. When I walked in I was confident I had found the right place, but I still asked the two men whether this was the Baptist Church. They started smiling and said I was at the wrong place. They belonged to another congregation. They kindly directed me to the gymnasium of the same school, where the Baptist Church was warming up to start their service. At the end of the service the pastor was exhorting its members to be on time at the start of the service. He was – very unlike normal Ghanaian church practice – clearly hurrying to finish the service. The first members of the next congregation to use the gymnasium were already waiting outside of the hall.1

1) Description based on my fieldnotes. All subsequent quotes without a mention of a source are from interviews or participant observations by myself or Karlijn Goossen, a student who did a pilot study for our project (published in Goossen 2006). Many thanks to her for the valuable information she provided about the Candle case.
The story above is very typical for contemporary Southeast. Roughly 70 per cent of the inhabitants of Southeast are first or second generation immigrants. People from Suriname, a former Dutch colony, make up the largest share of inhabitants. They migrated to Southeast in the mid 1970s. Most of the Surinamese are black, descendants from black slaves. The second largest group of immigrants, coming from Ghana, and other (West) African countries, started to arrive fifteen years later in Amsterdam, at the end of the 1980s (Ter Haar 1998). Since then Southeast has a majority of black people. The first African churches in Southeast started at the end of the 1980s. With the arrival of more African migrants the number of churches increased quickly. The leadership of the churches is usually made up of first generation immigrants; the second generation is yet too young to take leadership positions. African churches, due to their relatively short stay in Amsterdam and their poor members, are usually not very powerful when it comes to money and prestige. Some of their members work as expats, with well-paying jobs in the financial sector, but most Africans work in low wage jobs as cleaners or in factories.

Thanks to its migrants, Southeast has relatively high levels of religiosity, in particular Christian religiosity. The area houses between 100 and 130 churches. Two thirds of these churches consist of African churches, often Pentecostal, but not always. Approximately one-fifth of the 80,000 inhabitants of Southeast are involved in a church on a regular basis. All flavours of African Christianity are present in Southeast: Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, African Spiritual churches, Seventh-day Adventists, etc. Most of the African churches cater to a single ethnic group or to an otherwise homogeneous group, such as English speaking West Africans. Not all churches are happy with this, as they would like to attract Dutch members and re-evangelize the ’Dark Continent’ of Europe (cf. Koning and Knibbe in this issue, Hunt and Lightly 2001: 109). Several African churches are branches of churches that originated in Africa, such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God or the Celestial Church of Christ, others were founded in Europe, such as the True Teachings of Christ Temple, which started in Amsterdam but now has branches in other European countries (Ter Haar 1998). Some African churches are examples of reversed mission, an example being the Church of Pentecost, which has its headquarters in Ghana and was founded by an Irish missionary. There are also a number of multi-ethnic churches with a sizeable

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2) Based on figures by the Amsterdam Department of Research and Statistics, http://www.os.amsterdam.nl
3) Figures based on our survey.
African membership. An example is the Victory Outreach church, which has members from countries from all parts of the world. Many churches proudly demonstrate their international scope by displaying flags of all the countries its members come from.

The neighbourhood was originally constructed as the ‘city of the future’ (Dukes 2007: 228), an example of modern urban planning. The planners did not expect much interest in religion, so very few religious facilities were built. However, when the Africans and Surinamese immigrated to the area, a great shortage of worship space arose. The churches used whatever space they could find – gymnasia, office buildings, schools – but Southeast became in particular famous for its ‘garage churches.’ Southeast originally consisted of very large flats (some of them being a kilometre or more in length), with big car parks underneath. The middle classes whom the urban planners thought would populate Southeast instead choose to live in the ‘sleep cities’ (suburbs) around Amsterdam (Leeming and Shakur 2005). Since the 1970s Amsterdam Southeast has become an increasingly poor neighbourhood, and the car parks fell into disuse – until the churches began to use them. The garages were not very suitable as worship spaces: the buildings were meant to hold cars, not a singing and dancing mass of people. Despite the drawbacks however, the garages offered much needed space that could be used throughout the week.

Since the mid 1990s the worship situation became increasingly difficult with the demolition of several flats. The government in conjunction with the local housing associations had started a long term program to upgrade the social and economic structure of the neighbourhood. This program became known as the Renewal and changed the worship situation in Southeast. The unfolding of events related to the search for suitable worship space for the African churches during this process offer a good opportunity to understand the position of these churches in the local and transnational spaces coming together in Southeast.

The Renewal and the Construction of the Candle

The Renewal officially started in 1992 (Dukes 2007: 239) and is expected to continue until at least 2010. The total costs of the operation are estimated to surpass the figure of 500 million euros (Projectbureau Vernieuwing Bijlmermeer, 2008). The Renewal was led by the municipality, housing association Rochdale and the City District Southeast working in conjunction. The City District is a subdivision of the municipality, having its own Neighbourhood
Council and team of civil servants. Rochdale was the biggest housing association in Southeast. It owned 70 per cent of all real estate in the area\(^4\) and invested large sums of money in the Renewal.

The large flats that characterised Southeast were slowly being replaced by single family homes. The consequence was that many churches lost their worship garage. For example, the King of Kings Baptist Church, one of the larger Ghanaian congregations in Southeast, lost half of its members and had to stop many of its activities when the flat they were hiring space in was demolished. The pastor of King of Kings, Frank Kutu, commented:

> All social activities have been stopped because of this. The care and relief work for teenage mothers, help for homeless and addicted people, providing information, courses, the day care after school – we really want to do something, but we can’t do anything. (Pastor F. Kutu, quoted in Goossen 2006, 116)

However, the Renewal also proved to be a new opportunity to acquire worship space. The municipality and the housing association were willing to help with the building of new religious facilities. The two organisations valued the churches as ‘gateway[s] to social and economic emancipation of the people living in Amsterdam Southeast.’ (M. L. Boel, quoted in Goossen 2006: 120). Rochdale for example had noticed that the Ghanaian churches contributed to the financial stability of its members. No less important, however, was the fact that they needed the African churches to reach and control its African citizens and they recognised the political potential of the user base which the congregations represented. As a direct consequence of the Renewal several new church buildings came into being. In 2007 the *Candle* (‘Kandelaar’) was opened. This was a church intended to offer space for fifteen Ghanaian churches, some of which had lost their ‘worship garage.’ But before we can move onto this case, we have to explain a few things that had happened earlier.

**Black and White Politics**

Southeast had for many years been characterised by tensions that were framed as black – white issues. While the majority of the inhabitants were black, many of its politicians were white. This changed at the start of the Renewal.

\(^4\) Source: Amsterdamse Federatie van Woning Corporaties, awfc.nl, accessed September 20, 2007. The non-profit sector of the Dutch housing market is comparatively large, especially in the cities, but a portion of 70 per cent owned by one housing association is even for Dutch standards quite high.
Black politicians did not agree with the Renewal, because they found that local people had too little influence over what would happen (Dukes 2007: 250-257). They started a protest that proved very successful. The conflict became known as the ‘Black – White Conflict’ and nearly put an end to the Renewal. It only continued when several black (many Surinamese) politicians gained political influence. The framing by black politicians of the conflict as a black – white issue had proven very successful.

A few years later something similar happened. In 2005 the Lighthouse Chapel opened its doors. It was owned by the Pentecostal Church Southeast (PCS). This congregation was relatively old, established since 1973. It had a majority white Dutch constituency. In the past many Africans had been members, but they had moved to other African Pentecostal churches when these were formed in the mid 90s. The acquisition of the Lighthouse Chapel by the PCS was surrounded by controversy. Due to the Renewal, the PCS had lost its former worship location – just like many other churches. However, unlike other churches the PCS had a hiring contract that obliged the municipality to offer it alternative space. This was of course extremely difficult due to the shortage of worship space. The municipality then made an unusual move: it offered to sell a building to the PCS for a price far below its actual value. This alone would have generated a lot of political controversy, were it not that this decision was overshadowed by another, even more sensitive issue. Before the acquisition by the PCS, the building was rented by twelve African churches. These had to move – but where to? The African churches were angered by the selling of the building to a white congregation, and accused the municipality of favouring one congregation over others. The unofficial financial help the PCS received stood in stark contrast with the financial difficulties the African churches experienced. The African churches who lost their worship location felt they were treated with double standards. One of the pastors who protested was Emmanuel Koney of the Pentecost Revival International Church. Koney was a well known figure in Southeast, controversial and respected because of his confrontational political tactics. Two years earlier with the help of a Dutch politician he had squatted in the very same building to bring the difficulty of finding good worship locations to the public attention. Koney went to court to contest the sale and to bring the financial details of the deal between the municipality and the PCS into the open. The media agreed with the African churches’ perspective and readily framed the issue, again, as a black – white issue. The Amsterdam newspaper the Parool for example published an article (July 3, 2004) which had the following subheading: ‘three thousand black Christians out, 200 whites in.’ Koney later publicly distanced himself from
this framing. In an interview he said: ‘We are only three years old, [...] that other church resides much longer in the Bijlmer.’ (NRC Handelsblad, August 9, 2004). However, he and his church benefited from the political upheaval. The president of the Neighbourhood Council, Elvira Sweet used her political power to soothe the tension and arranged an alternative location for Koney’s church. Interestingly, Sweet was a Surinamese, black woman, who had come to power partly thanks to the first Black – White Conflict.

The Lighthouse Chapel controversy and the earlier black – white tensions formed an important background for the municipality and Rochdale to be involved in the search of African churches for worship space. To avoid juicy new headlines the municipality and Rochdale knew they had something to prove.

The Building of the Candle

Work towards building a church for the African congregations began in 1997 and took ten years to finish. The goal was to build a multi functional church centre with multiple worship spaces, offices and conference rooms. Five Ghanaian churches initiated the project, which after some time received the name ‘the Candle.’ Building a church in Southeast is very expensive: land prices are high, and the building has to conform to strict and therefore expensive health and safety regulations. Each congregation on its own did not have sufficient financial resources, so the pastors wanted to pool resources. But even together the congregations did not have enough money to build a church. They decided to work with other partners, in particular the municipality, the housing association Rochdale and the Protestant Church of Amsterdam. This last partner had historically been the dominant denomination in Amsterdam. While the denomination had lost many of its members due to secularisation, it was still one of the most powerful churches with many material, social and human resources.

The process from the initial ideas to the opening of the Candle in 2007 was long and fragile and was almost aborted at several moments. The biggest problem was the financial situation. In the early stages of the project the municipality investigated the financial situation of the churches. This proved difficult. Many churches did not keep administrative records that conformed to the standards Rochdale, the municipality and the banks were accustomed to. One member of Rochdale called the administration of some churches ‘little more than a shoebox with receipts.’ Although the churches participating in the
Candle received stable financial support from its members, and could prove they had paid their rents for their current worship locations without problems, this was not enough assurance for their partners. In the words of Irma van der Heuvel, who worked for Rochdale: ‘The only thing we knew for sure was: they can pay the rent. So we could look forward one month. In a long term planning process of several decades this is a big risk.’

In 2000 and 2001 the municipality again researched the financial solvability of the Ghanaian churches. It quickly became clear that there would be a big exploitation deficit. The churches just could not bear the financial burdens of the project. The project received its first major revision: the congregations would no longer become the owners of the Candle, but would hire it. The centre would be owned by Rochdale. Furthermore, it would no longer be just a church centre, but a community centre. To make the building financially profitable, a number of apartments would be built on top of the building and additional space was added for non-religious social and commercial activities. The congregations regretted this decision. They wanted maximum attention for their religious mission. The widening of the Candle project to a community centre would diminish the visible presence of the congregations in the neighbourhood. But for Rochdale this change was the first of many leaps of faith to accommodate the congregations. Keeping the building in ownership meant they would bear the burden if something went wrong.

The shift to a community centre offered the opportunity to find additional funds. The secular activities would be used as a stable fundament to achieve what was still the major goal of the Candle: to provide worship space for Ghanaian churches. The profits from commercial activities made it possible for Rochdale to lower the price of hiring worship space. The Candle could furthermore receive subsidies from the government. Of course, religious activities would never be subsidised, but subsidies for social activities would indirectly benefit the congregations. For example, the Candle received a subsidy because it intensively used the available space – space is valuable in Amsterdam and there were governmental subsidies to promote dense use of space. The money was used to enhance the whole building, including the church halls, with quality air conditioning and thick walls. The churches meanwhile went on with finding funds, subsidies and other sources of money for the Candle. Despite these efforts, there remained a deficit of 1 million euros in the yearly budget. The churches proposed creative solutions, such as offering to let church members clean and maintain the building, but the Candle still proved too expensive.
There were two moments that proved to be crucial for the continuation of the process. In 2003 Emmanuel Koney joined the group of Ghanaian pastors. Koney was the pastor of one of the largest churches in the area. He had previously tried to build his own worship hall and had acquired a grant of 1.5 million US dollars from a sister church in Australia to build a place of worship. He was willing to use these funds for the Candle. While he was controversial because of his involvement in the Lighthouse Chapel issue, when he joined the group of pastors, the trust of Rochdale and the municipality in the project noticeably increased.

The other defining moment came in the spring of 2004 when unexpectedly the Bijlmer’s Churches Foundation (BCF, in Dutch: ‘Stichting Bijlmerkerken’) offered to provide a financial warranty for the Candle. BCF was founded by an evangelical pastor in the Protestant Church, who is well known for his many activities to support the growth of an evangelical style Christianity within and outside the Protestant Church. The BCF started a fundraising campaign. Although they did not raise enough money to completely finance the Candle, they could provide financial guarantees. The president of the foundation later commented that their organisation was like the prince who awoke Sleeping Beauty from her sleep with a kiss: ‘With a little kiss it was possible to take this building from the ground.’ The Ghanaian pastors were happy with this unexpected help. Pastor Kutu saw BCF as ‘a gift from God.’ (Goossen 2006: 123 and 127). However, they had the feeling they had gradually lost their grip on the project. Nevertheless, the actual building of the Candle could be started: in 2005 the ramming of the first pile in the ground was officially celebrated.

**Conflict, Trust and the Role of Personal Relationships**

The whole process from the initial plans to the finishing of the Candle was no smooth ride. Besides the financial troubles, there were many small and bigger conflicts within the group responsible for the development. Despite the conflicts, however, the process can also be seen as a process of building trust.

A particularly thorny issue was the relation between the English speaking Africans and the Dutch. Communication proved to be difficult. Added to this was the fact that some of the Dutch did not trust the capacity and motives of the Ghanaians. One conflict was about the language of the meetings. These

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5) Bijlmer, or sometimes Bijlmermeer, is another name for a part of Amsterdam Southeast.
were held in Dutch, which the Ghanaians found difficult to understand, especially when it came to important details. Some pastors were annoyed by this, felt unwelcome and therefore stopped attending the meetings. Only after Pastor Kutu shared the concerns of the Ghanaians about the language, did the Dutch agree to let the minutes be translated into English. Another issue was the financial administration of the churches. The Dutch found that the African churches did not have good financial administration, and demanded that the Africans brought their administration into order. Somewhere during the process the African pastors had to go to an administration course. But several pastors did not attend this course, or only irregularly. The Africans found it patronising, and did not trust the motives behind the course. According to a Rochdale representative the African churches agreed with the goal of the course, but ‘they didn’t trust it, because the course was paid by the municipal government.’ They feared handing over financial details of their churches would be used against them by the Bureau of Taxes. These conflicts were more than just problems caused by intercultural communication. Pastor Koney remarked:

The problem wasn’t so much culture, but had much more to do with the fact that it was a new experience and moreover with trust and distrust between different parties. In my opinion, the latter was the biggest [factor].

The only reason that the project continued despite the many conflicts was because some of the key players within Rochdale trusted the pastors of the Ghanaian churches and vice versa. A feeling of obligation and mutual commitment had developed between them over the years. Irma van der Heuvel explained:

We are talking about a project of eight years. It was as strange combination of project leaders and churches. The group became close, and we developed trust in each other. A lot of things happened which normally would have crashed the project. The fact that the project succeeded has to do with a combination of persons within the churches, who believed in the project and who worked very hard to realize the church centre. And one project leader, who, because of their enthusiasm and commitment, decided: ‘we need to look beyond our own limits, and really find ways to realize it.’ This combination did it.

Rochdale was by far the most powerful player in the process. They had the money and they were willing to take the financial risks associated with the Candle. That they were willing to invest millions of Euros in the project was essentially a very personal decision, depending on a few people trusting in the capacity and trustworthiness of a few other people.
The Layer of White Helpers

One remarkable feature of the whole project was the fact that the African churches from the very start of the project, were encapsulated by a layer of ‘white helpers’ (Pink 1998). In the 90s, when the African pastors began to draw attention to their difficulties in finding worship space, a few Dutch white politicians and other ‘local influentials’ (Merton 1957) became personally involved in the issue. They played the role of broker between the migrant churches and the municipality and other organisations in the area. When the Candle project was started several advisors from other parties took part in the meetings. There was one juridical advisor who officially was associated with an organisation of migrant churches in the Netherlands, but who was also a well known member of the Dutch Protestant Church. He played a very important role during the early phases of the project. The Dutch Protestant Church played an advisory role and for a while tried to find additional subsidies. The BCF was a prime example of white helpers. All these people and organisations wanted to help the African churches. But a consequence of this help was that the African pastors felt that the process was taken out of their hands.

The African pastors themselves were ambiguous about the role of those helpers. On the one hand, they were aware that they could use help, with money, but also with expertise and trust. Kutu for example mentioned: ‘We needed someone to help us prove to people, organisations and institutions that if you give us money we will pay you back.’ According to Kutu BCF ‘resuscitated’ the Candle project not only because they brought in funds, but also because they enhanced the trustworthiness of the African pastors:

When Rochdale saw that Dutch people are involved, they were interested in helping us. Cause, I could see that from the very start, we were immigrants, you know. So they find it a little difficult, but when the Dutch came in, and saw that they are also Christians, they wanted to help us.

On the other hand they were annoyed by the fact that sometimes they were seen as people who could not handle things themselves. Koney commented: ‘I often had the impression that they were looking at us – and accordingly treating us – like we are illiterate and dim-witted.’ He recounted an experience that very much offended him when a municipal project manager told him: ‘listen, Emmanuel, let us handle this. Unlike you guys we studied at universities, we know what we are doing.’ This in spite of the fact that most of these pastors are in fact university educated.

The white helpers did things the Africans could not control, or did not even agree with. They were puzzled by the motives of the white helpers. Why did
these Dutch people want to help, what was their agenda? They resented that sometimes the Dutch made choices or took initiatives that were not in their direct interest. Another thing they resented was that in the media often only the ‘white’ organisations were mentioned as taking the initiative, while the Africans were portrayed as the receivers of the help. For several reasons the Candle project drew quite a lot of media attention, in particular from Christian media networks. The journalists interpreted the project along the lines of familiar images of Dutch-African relations, with the former as the givers and the latter as receivers. The African pastors suspected that the white helpers did nothing to contest this image or even actively helped shaping it. For example, Koney accused the BCF of claiming all the responsibility for raising funds for the Candle, while he and his church choir travelled the whole year across the Netherlands to raise funds. Commenting on the role of the Dutch organisations in Southeast, one African pastor said: ‘One thing I’ve learned is that people don’t come to help you, but to use you for their own goals.’

A New Light Shining

Considering the long and difficult trajectory, one can wonder why the Ghanaian churches kept going with the project. This can partly be explained by their missionary motives: they wanted to have a presence in Southeast that would enable their mission for society but also to make it known to all. This is one of the reasons the project was named ‘The Candle.’ It is a reference to a verse in the bible (Matthew 5:15) that speaks about a lampstand which gives light ‘for all who are in the house.’ The Christian participants in the project felt they had been sent to Southeast to bring the Gospel to all people ‘in the house’: to Africans, Dutch, Surinamese and Antillians.

In November 2007 the Candle was finally officially opened. The ceremony was attended by several politicians, representatives of several churches including national Dutch denominations, church members, members of Rochdale, national and local media etc. Koney acted as a host, dressed in traditional Ghanaian robes. In the spirit of the whole project a political row ensued when a well-known Dutch local politician began to shout ‘liar, liar!’ at one of the invited speakers. Koney managed to ease the tension, and the ceremony could proceed. Elvira Sweet, the president of the Neighbourhood Council, and a minister of the national government ceremoniously lit five bowls of fire,

6) Explaining the whole incident brings us too far from our subject, but it had to do with the speaker claiming that the Candle was the first real church building in the area, which it was obviously not.
symbolic of the five worship halls in the building. The minister then addressed the gathered people:

Until now, your churches came together in garage buildings. That is, to quote Matthew 5, ‘to hide the candle for the eye’. I cannot imagine a more fitting name for this church building than The Candle. Now everybody can see that the Lord is praised here.

The gathered public heartily agreed with this statement.

**Analysis: The Importance of the Local**

Let’s return to the issues we raised at the start of the article: what does this case tell us about the importance of the local in considering the transnational character of African churches? One of the most obvious features of the process is how non transnational it was. The whole process was marked by a process of building (and sometimes losing) trust between the African pastors and the Dutch people involved. Local politics, in particular the black – white tensions were always in the background and provided an important motive to finish the project: white politicians and ‘helpers’ had to show they were including Africans. The process was also a great feat of endurance, in particular by the pastors: for ten years they had to endure many misgivings and misrepresentations, they had to communicate using language that was not their own etc. Endurance, local politics and building trust are phenomena that do not easily fit a theoretical frame that focuses on global migration flows, transnational interdependencies and flexible attachments.

**Trust, Politics and Endurance**

Looking back it is remarkable that the Candle project turned out well despite the lack of financial resources. The ‘social capital’ (Coleman 1988, Putnam 2000) that had accumulated over the years made the difference. The trust that had developed over the years between the key players in Rochdale and the Ghanaian pastors was crucial. Rochdale could have aborted the project at several moments. They did not do this because they were committed to the project.

This process of trust building was not all warm and fuzzy. There was a strong political element in the whole process, in particular during the black – white Conflict and the Lighthouse Chapel controversy. The municipality and Rochdale were aware that they were dependent on the African churches. They
needed the support of the churches for political reasons, but also to keep South East a liveable place. The social function of the churches was severely hampered by the bad worship situation and Rochdale and the municipality were aware of this. Several politicians worked hard to keep the Renewal going while maintaining the African churches as their friends. Pastor Koney was a master in working in this political environment and using the tensions to his advantage.

Ethnicity and colour were major stumbling blocks in this process of building trust. Black and white, African and Dutch are simple categories that can powerfully define a situation. The newspaper’s summary of the Lighthouse Chapel controversy with the quote ‘three thousand black Christians out, 200 whites in’ was not just a statement of an uninformed journalist bent on producing a juicy story. The quote is an example of a familiar frame of reference, which had been used several times as a tool for political leverage. One pervasive feature of many of the Dutch involved in the Candle case, was that they thought they knew what was best for the Africans in Southeast. They underestimated the qualities of the Africans, for example the educational level of its leaders. We can understand the Candle as a replication of a well known dynamic we see in development projects (Ostrom 1999, Pink 1998, Roy 2005). This is ironic, as too often Africa is associated with being in need of development, while the African churches have an entirely different view of themselves. The African congregations are well aware of this dynamic, and resent any attempts to pamper them or to represent them in the public space. As Frank Kutu, pastor of King of Kings Baptist Church put it: ‘Because we didn’t know the system, we had to do it the Ghanaian way. But that does not mean we are stupid.’ Although they resented this dynamic, they had to put up with it, as they did not have access to the locally available capital they needed.

The process that led to the Candle is a clear case for the importance of the local to understanding African churches in Southeast. All the resources the churches used to acquire worship space, were resources that were available locally, sometimes exclusively so. All the trust and obligation that the churches may have developed over the years in other transnational spaces and with global organisations would not have provided them with the political and social capital necessary to get the local government or Rochdale to cooperate with them. This does not mean that local embedding is always good, as the ambiguous feelings of Ghanaian pastors with regard to the Candle show. Trust, land, building regulations, political manœuvring – all these and similar things are locally defined and grasped. Maybe less so than in previous decades, but
the transnational spheres can be very far away, even in a hotspot of African diaspora Christianity, which Amsterdam Southeast also surely is.

My point here is not that the transnational dimension is not important. On the contrary, there are several elements even in the Candle case that point to the transnational linkages of the African churches to Africa and the rest of the world. An example is Koney who acquired a gift of one and a half million dollars from an Australian sister church. My point however is that even very transnational religious movements sometimes need to ground themselves. The transnationalism that so strongly defines new religious movements may in some cases become a very much ‘transient affair’ to again quote Favell (2003). All their transnational linkages did not help the African pastors when they had to endure being sent on an administrative course or being questioned about their academic credentials. They came up against what Favell calls the ‘ingrained orders of social power in the host society.’ Those ingrained orders are still very local orders. As with the expats that Favell describes, African churches are disadvantaged in comparison to local residents if they want to acquire local benefits such as a good worship location.

Transnational and Local Strategies

However, we should not set up the two, transnationalism and localism, against each other. Rather we should understand them as two strategies, as two modes of approaching issues. Whether a congregation uses transnational resources or invests in local embedding is a matter of judgment of what will work, what the goal is, and at which level the goal should be set at. We can imagine that with the development of a genuinely European public sphere, migrant churches will choose, for some issues, to influence European policy, instead of taking a national route. For example the issue of the treatment of undocumented migrants (cf. Van der Meulen 2008) could well be addressed at the European level. Migrant churches, with their dense intra-European networks, may be better suited to do this than nationally established churches, turning power relations upside down. However, building a house of worship is a particularly local thing to do. One cannot construct a church building in a transnational field. It is always located in a particular place, intended for a local public, and influenced by the particularities of its surroundings. A congregation located in Amsterdam Southeast, while it can be a hub in larger transnational networks, will draw its regular public from the area around it, not from the Eastern parts of the Netherlands, nor from Berlin, Accra or London. Neither are there transnational building regulations or global housing associations that churches
have to deal with. The churches that took part in the Candle case are very aware of this fact. While they knew they were part of a transnational migration dynamic, they invested in a fixed place in one particular location.

It is important to note that it matters from which perspective one sees this transnational – local dynamic. From an individual perspective, migration is immensely flexible. But congregations are much more fixed. Congregation as institutions become embedded in local society and nurture a practice of continuing engagement with local society, even when individual members move elsewhere. The missionary motives of congregations also promote an attachment to place. Congregations do not view themselves as shops, providing religious goods in Southeast just because there happen to be Africans in the place. Nor do they easily consider, with a capitalist logic, moving to a place where even more Africans can be served. They want to serve a local public. Whether the African churches succeed in doing this is another question. Koning (this issue) and others (Marti 2005 and 2009, Garces-Foley 2007) describe how difficult it is to cross ethnic borders and to sustain a congregational life that addresses different cultures. This is not to say that congregations never follow the faithful or set up new sister churches in other cities. In fact, they do. However, we should not forget the quite obvious fact that many churches, even if they are part of a transnational network, opt for local engagement.

With all the interesting research on transnationalism that is now going on, we should not forget to investigate how African and other migrant religious congregations are willingly part of local dynamics. Future research should take into account the rootedness and participation of migrant organisations in local dynamics. An interesting question would be how groups make different choices in whether and how they adapt local or transnational strategies. Knibbe in this issue for example describes the RCCG parish Jesus House of All Nations, also located in Amsterdam Southeast, which connects to local society in different ways than the churches that took part in the Candle. Interestingly, Jesus House also acquired a new worship location in 2007, not with a difficult process of building social capital, but with help from the denominational headquarters in Lagos and London. The RCCG denomination plays an active role in the local dealings of its parishes. The denomination tries to shape its own field of transnational religious reality by planting new churches everywhere in the world (cf. Hunt 2001, Adogame 2007). Other churches may have similar missionary motives, but such a focused strategy that is backed by denominational resources is quite unique. How different forms of interaction with local society and different configurations of transnational organisation are related is an interesting but neglected field of research (cf. Levitt 2004, 2007).
Another interesting point that emerges from the case is the question of power in producing the local and the transnational. Scholars of transnationalism (cf. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003) have traditionally stressed how transnational spaces and local places are products of actors, or what Smith (2005) calls ‘power brokers’: companies, individuals, states, organisations etc. This case shows that the actors that conceive themselves as part of the local – whether this is Southeast, or differently defined locals such as The Netherlands, ‘white’ or ‘native church’ – are very powerful because of their access to social and material capital. But maybe more interesting is their power in defining mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. Who is in and who is out? Who is poor and who is rich? In this case the locals often had the last word in defining, but not always. In becoming part of the local dynamic the African churches begin to redefine what Southeast is. They take part in the power plays not only to construct buildings but also to construe Southeast as a different place. It is in this light again interesting to compare this case to Knibbe’s article. The RCCG motto ‘we came here as landlords, not as tenants’ seems right on the mark in offering a different definition of what the role of the Africans in Southeast is. A claim to power to construe Southeast, not only according to the definitions of the self proclaimed locals but in new ways. Whether others accept these claims to power or maybe have entirely different maps and definitions in their head is another question, which Knibbe discusses at length. However, this and Knibbe’s article show that Southeast is not just local. It has become a translocal place: a place where notions of who is local and who is not remain important, but also a place where transnational actors are slowly redefining locality and sources of local power by creating new networks and constituencies. As such it becomes part of dynamics beyond its geographical borders, a place in a larger map of transnational African Christianity.

Conclusion

We can in retrospect wonder then whether it was a good strategy for the Ghanaian pastors who started the Candle project to cooperate with Rochdale, the Protestant Church and the municipality. In the end the strategy worked – the Candle was finished – but the Ghanaian pastors had to go against the ‘ingrained orders of social power’ when they started the Candle project. Because of their weak financial position and familiar images of Dutch-African relations they became caught in a process they could no longer control. The resources they
needed to build the Candle were available locally, but at a price. Would it not have been a better strategy to call in transnational help, circumventing the difficult process of finding local resources? The question is whether this would have been wise. If a church wants to have an impact on Amsterdam Southeast it has to invest in obtaining access to local power. Africans may be ‘transnational villagers’ (Levitt 2001) living in transnational economic and social fields, the other residents of Southeast are not – at least not in the same transnational fields. The African churches that took part in the Candle have become embedded in the local, particular place of Southeast. In the process they have reshaped the political and social ‘ingrained orders’ of Southeast. They have gained social, political and human capital. In this sense they are now better prepared for a next step that many African churches dearly want to make: to not only land African Christianity on European soil, but to bring it to the hearts and minds of all its peoples.

References


