



International migration, multi-local livelihoods and human security:

Perspectives from Europe, Asia and Africa

30 and 31 August 2007

Institute of Social Studies

The Netherlands

Panel 5

International Migration, Citizenship, Identities and Cultures

Title

The power of the word. How Angolan Pentecostal Christians in Rotterdam experience power in an uncertain world.

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How Angolan Pentecostal Christians in Rotterdam experience power in an uncertain world.

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Introduction

How is the wellbeing of young Angolan refugees in Rotterdam served by their participation in a Pentecostal migrant church? In seeking an answer, I base myself on current fieldwork, done in the Rotterdam branch of the Igreja Maná, an international Portuguese-speaking Pentecostal church. Although in the church's view wellbeing is explicitly related to material prosperity and success, to be gained in the direct contextual environment of its members, the access to this wellbeing is simultaneously de-contextualised by the notion of 'having entered the kingdom of God and its own rules', in which the 'power of the word' plays a central role. This means that living according to these laws, by using the power of the word to proclaim health, wealth and happiness, the subject can achieve material richness in any environment, even when the latter is in crisis, in war and in deep poverty. 'It does not matter in which country you live, when you live the life of the Kingdom, you will be prosperous'. However, in daily life there *are* differences in circumstances that lead to different levels of access to the resources of Dutch society, like income and housing. The believers' worldview and self-image show a delicate balance between the power of human agency on one hand and the vulnerability towards spiritual (and worldly) powers on the other. My research is focused on how individuals deal with these theological notions in their own life, with the tensions these notions evoke as well as with the support they provide. In this paper I will illustrate how this church provides for a context in which Angolan Christians can address their past and present life (contextualization) and are challenged to surpass it (de-contextualization).

The situation of Angolans in The Netherlands

As the 2002 IOM International Organization for Migration report shows¹, The Netherlands have been by far the most important destination for Angolan asylum seekers in comparison with other West European countries. Since 1998, after the last severe outburst of violence in Angola's civil war, statistics demonstrate an asylum influx of Angolans in the Netherlands, most of them being youngsters. More than 50% of the registered Angolan population in the Netherlands is under 18. In the period between 1999 and 2001 the Netherlands accommodated almost 8000 Angolan asylum seekers, twice as many as between 1991 and 1999.² Since Angola is in peace, after a complicated peace process that in 2002 resulted in an agreement between the government party MPLA and the rebel party UNITA, many Angolan asylum seekers did not receive a residence permit or could not prolong their temporary permit. Even before the peace agreement, and especially in reaction to the large flow of minor asylum seekers from Angola, the Dutch government changed its policy in order to discourage foreign youngsters in deciding to go to The Netherlands. Was the day care for children and youngsters in first instance focused on education and integration, since 2001 the policy is directed to return to the country of origin.³ For the current group of Angolan minors in The Netherlands, especially for those whose apply for residence has been rejected, this means that the majority will have to return as soon as they have reached the age of 18. Compared to other African migrants in The Netherlands, Angolans are young, low educated, and do not form a strong community by means of self organizations, although individuals do build their own networks from the moment they meet in asylum camps and prefer to live together. Only Stichting 'JAN' (Jonge Angolezen in Nederland), an Angolan organization for youngsters

¹ See IOM International Organization for Migration. *Pilot Project: Prepared Return phase one: profile analysis of Angolans in the Netherlands*, September 2002.

² Ibid., p. 17 – 18. citing CBS statistics Voorburg/Heerlen, 22-03-2002.

³ AMA-nota, Staatssecretaris Kalsbeek, 1 mei 2001.

who have to return to Angola, plays a certain role for this specific Angolan group.⁴ Rotterdam is very popular among Angolans, because of its large cognate community of Cape-Verdians.⁵ In sum, Angolans in The Netherlands generally have to deal with uncertainty, lack of access to resources for building a life, such as education, formal jobs, etcetera. Since 2004, more than 400 Angolans a year do return ‘voluntarily’ to Angola with the support of IOM International Organization for Migration, mostly because they do not expect to have a future in The Netherlands.⁶

Igreja Maná in The Netherlands

Igreja Maná originally is a Portuguese Pentecostal church, founded by Jorge Tadeu, a Portuguese engineer, born and raised in a Roman Catholic family in Mozambique. Tadeu moved to South Africa, where he converted to Pentecostalism. In 1984, he came to Lisbon in order to start his own church, called Igreja Maná. The church began to grow firstly in Portugal, but soon its development surpassed the frontiers of Portugal and Europe. In Angola Igreja Maná opened in 1988, because of the fact that Angolan migrants brought videotapes from the church to their relatives. It developed at first in the capital Luanda. Now the church claims to have over 800 local churches in Angola. Tadeu nowadays is called the Apostle of the church; he is the absolute leader at the top of its strongly hierarchical structure. In the Netherlands, Igreja Maná has ten local churches, all of them having mainly Angolan refugees as their members. Its current national Bishop is a Portuguese, ordained and sent to The Netherlands by Tadeu. It is a genuine migrant church, although Tadeu in the early nineties attempted to start a Dutch Maná church, in which he however did not succeed.

⁴ See www.jongeangolezen.nl; see also Anja van Heelsum, *Afrikanen in Nederland*, Centraal bureau voor de Statistiek, Bevolkingstrends, 3^e kwartaal 2005.

⁵ Ministerie van Justitie, *Afrikanen uit Angola, DR Congo, Ethiopie, Eritrea, Nigeria en Sudan in Nederland. Een profiel*, 1 Januari 2006, pp. 24-26.

⁶ IOM International Organization for Migration, *Returning to Angola. Research into the determinant factors for return of Angolans from the Netherlands*, 2006.

In Rotterdam, Igreja Maná came into being in 1999, when some Angolans and Cape-Verdians, members of this church in their home country, started to organize reunions, first in a private house and soon in a building near the central railway station. During the first period those reunions were informal, without much involvement by the Portuguese mother church, except the fact that it sent a young couple as pioneers to The Netherlands to build new churches. This couple, Miguel and Christina Monteiro, became at a later stage the national leaders of Igreja Maná in The Netherlands. Maná Rotterdam grew quickly and more than once had to look for larger housing. Angolans became the major population from the moment that the reunions were held on Sunday. Although the church regularly attracted new converts, it lost many believers as well, due to their (mostly forced) return to Angola or due to a fading enthusiasm for the church practice and doctrines. In spite of these fluctuations there is, however, a strong core group of believers that attends the church from the beginning or at least for the last five years. Nowadays the weekly Sunday reunion is attended by more or less 100 believers. With this number it is the largest Maná church in The Netherlands. The average age within the church shows similarity with the general figures about Angolans in The Netherlands that demonstrate a majority of 54% under the age of 18 in 2002.⁷ Many believers are young and single, between 16 and 22 years old. There are many young families with small children. Their social and political conditions however seem to differ to some extent. The percentage of believers that eventually has received a residence permit seems larger than the general average of 20% of Angolans in the Netherlands.⁸ But still the believers of this church do form a mix of:

-young and single people who have the possibility to study and build a life in The Netherlands,

-those who still have to wait for an outcome of the procedure,

⁷ IOM 2002: 19.

⁸ My personal assessment based on interviews with the local pastor and 20 believers. See for the nationwide average of 20% : Ministerie van Justitie, 2006:22. From 11521 asylum applications 2222 were assigned.

- those who have been rejected and now live as illegal immigrants,
- families that have a rather established life with their children at school,
- families that have lived here for over thirteen years, still have no residence permit, whose children go to school temporarily but have no permit to work or study from the moment they reach the age of 18.

Igreja Maná and wellbeing – vision and practice

A quick look at the leaflets that Igreja Maná uses to attract new converts learns that wellbeing in this earthly life is an important issue. Becoming a Christian means solving your problems in life, either being material, or social or spiritual.⁹ Although attention is given to the spiritual afterlife as well, in this paper I concentrate on this worldly orientation that is so characteristic for this church. The promises are clear and without any hesitation. God always has a solution. This discourse not only appears in evangelization leaflets, but in every single church meeting. The general idea about living a Christian life is, that it should (and *can!*) be prosperous, which means wealthy, successful, healthy and happy. There are two theological key issues that are at stake in this idea. The first key issue concerns the victory of Christ. In his resurrection two thousand years ago, Christ has overcome all evil in the world, including diseases, misfortune and unhappiness. The second key issue is the victory of the Christian believer. As a consequence of the victory of Christ the believer has the power to overcome his or her problems. The only condition is, that the believer knows how to use this power. At this point, Igreja Maná, like other Neo-Pentecostal churches, has developed as a central doctrine and church practice: the idea of *the power of the word, i.e. the human word*.

⁹ See for instance: Justiça Cega (blind Justice). A Justiça tapa os olhos à injustiça que está a ser feita. Aumento de Impostos, Reformas Atrasadas, Documentos Negados. Entregue o seu caso a Deus. Deus tem a solução para os seus problemas. (The court closes its eyes for the injustice that is being committed. Tax rise, postponement of pension, refused documents. Bring your case towards God. God has a solution for your problems)

Neo-Pentecostal Churches inherited this idea of the power of the word from the Word of Faith Movement, which originated in the United States under the leadership of the founding fathers Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. They were inspired by some ideas from older Pentecostal movements, with emphasis on holiness and healing, which had their origins in 18th century Methodism.¹⁰ As mentioned before, according to this view God's role has been played in the death and resurrection of Christ in the past and everything that is needed for a happy and healthy and successful life is there in the new order of the universe. This new order is the Kingdom of God, entered by the converted person, the believer. The believer has to grasp the laws of this kingdom with the power of his words, claiming the promises of the Kingdom into being. If the believer does not know how to do this, God can do nothing. Although the believer entered the kingdom of God by his sinner's prayer, he can open the door to demons in his own and others' life without knowing, simply by the words he utters. He can withdraw himself from God's protection without intending to do so. The only solution for this problem lies in his own hands: he has to confess his sins to God, break the power of the Devil by speaking the right words to the demons and claim victory over his problems. The believer learns that from the moment he has entered the Kingdom of God, in particular in this church, he steps into a spiritual war between God and Satan, the Enemy of God and therefore the enemy of the believer. All trouble the believer encounters in life is caused by the Devil. One biblical verse that is "cited" in every single sermon and meeting is John 10:10: *o diabo vem para roubar, matar e destruir!* (*the Devil comes to rob, kill and destroy*).¹¹ But the doctrine says: in fact the Devil now is under the believer's feet, who just has to confess this with his words. Therefore he can and must fight the Devil with the power of the word. Igreja

¹⁰ A. Perriman (ed.), (.), *Faith, Health and Prosperity. A Report on 'Word of Faith' and 'Positive Confession' Theologies by The Evangelical Alliance (UK) Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals*, Carlisle 2003, pp.1-9, 58-77. For a much broader and differentiated insight in origins and development of (Neo)-Pentecostalism see also A. Anderson, *An introduction to Pentecostalism*, Birmingham 2004, pp. 39-165.

¹¹ In fact, this is a modification of the bible text that says: "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy*". In the preceding parable of John 10: 1-5, however, the thief is not necessarily the Devil.

Maná is not unique in its central notion of prosperity nor in its practice of the power of the word. But as far as I can see it is rather specific in its extension of this practice. I will describe two examples of the way this power of the word is practiced.

During the intercession, which is a regular part of the weekly cell group meetings, a few members are assigned to pray for a certain issue. While praying, the group members hold each other's hands. One of them, a fourteen-year-old girl, is still learning how to do these prayers. She always tries to avoid being chosen, but most of the time the woman who is the leader of the group has no mercy for her and says: "you pray now!!!" While praying, the girl always becomes very nervous and tensed. Sometimes she stops in the middle of a sentence. And in the end her prayer fades away. When she holds my hand, I feel the growing pressure, due to the way she pinches my hand harder and harder. When the leader ends the prayer session with her own prayer, she always repeats the prayer for the issue the girl was supposed to pray for, because the words had not come out like they should have. Therefore that prayer had no power and did not count.

The second example concerns the Sunday meetings. The 'povo', the people of God, regularly are assigned to stamp their feet on the ground, to let the Devil know that his place is there. The power of the word is expressed by repeatedly shouting confessions and claims that are said to be the more materialized the more intensely spoken. Intercession for any topic always follows the same structure: the people plead with God for the desired object in the name of Jesus, with their hands risen; then they order the Devil to let go of the object in the name of Jesus, with their hands slapping downwards, finally thanking God in the name of Jesus that he has done what was asked for, again with their hands risen.

This prayer and its body language express how in my view the believer is situated in life, or even the universe: *he* is the central point. It is his responsibility to act towards God and the Devil, following the rules of the Kingdom. It seems that he is completely in charge. He stands

on the edge of good and bad, of the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the Enemy (the world), but with a God who only reacts and a Devil who always acts. This seems a difficult and exhausting position to maintain. In my research, however, I found that individual believers in fact derive much strength from the idea that their acting is what it is all about, even when the pressure seems too high because their actual achievement is too far from the ideal. I try to describe what mechanisms are at stake here that make it work for this special group of Angolan asylum seekers.

Contextualization – De-contextualization

Angolan Maná believers tell me that one of the most appealing aspects of this church is, that all they hear is about themselves. Following my own observations during church meetings and the data I collected during my interviews, I will elaborate on three aspects that might explain why believers experience this church that way.

“This church tells me what my problems are and why I meet all this trouble in my life. Although I initially came for the contacts with friends and for the music, later on I started listening better to what the pastor said and reading the Bible as the pastor had said, and I discovered: This is about me. This is about my life. This is the truth”. This is a fragment of an interview with a 21-year-old Angolan woman, who could not prolong her temporary residence permit two years ago, but still has not finished her procedure. Since the day her permit expired she receives a small monthly benefit, but is not allowed to work or study. The pastor always mentions problems that are recognizable for her, such as how to gain enough money to live, how to find a house, how to obtain a job and especially how to deal with problems caused by institutional bureaucracy. Even in her situation she was challenged to be ambitious in her desires. She wanted a larger room, with her own kitchen and toilet and was very dedicated to find it. “If God wants to give me this, no one in the world can stop him”, she

said, “but I have to do my own job. When I sit and wait, God cannot help me”. Another interviewee, a young 16 year old girl, who lives in illegality because of a mistake she made in describing her situation to the authorities, told me that her mentor once said to her: “if I had any say in the matter, you would never receive a residence permit!” She had answered: “no one in this land has a say in this, only God! If he wants me to stay in The Netherlands, you can do what you want, but I will receive it”. And she said to me: “one day, when I have it, I will go to her and show it!” The church, by addressing existential problems in a very material and concrete way, provides for a context in which believers feel recognized and encouraged to express their daily life issues in terms of hope and solution within their belief in a helping God.

A second characteristic aspect of the church is the rule to forget the past and to look forward. This rule is focused on the negative aspects of the past that are said to infect and destroy life when they are brought up again. Positive experiences on the contrary must be cherished. This instruction relates strongly to the idea of the power of the word. Speaking about the past evokes it within present life. In interviews I found that almost all interviewees did not want to describe the experiences that had made them leave Angola. “It is not good to talk about it, because it makes me sad and makes me look backwards. I must look forward in order to go forward and achieve my goals in life” was the common explanation. ‘Forgetting the past’ at first sight does not look like a way to connect with the life context of these Angolan migrants. However, I prefer to interpret the almost weekly repeated instruction to forget, as it is mentioned in lessons, in sermons, in prayers and in songs, *as their way* to deal with it, addressing it, without having to recapitulate what had happened concretely. A common greeting in the church is: “sempre em frente”, which literally means ‘always (going) forward’. With regard to this aspect I would like to mention a remarkable reaction to a special custom in the church: the ‘palavra de amor’ (word of love) in every meeting, either being a Sunday

reunion or a cell group meeting. This means that the pastor or an elder, or a cell group leader preaches how to love our fellow human being, the latter either being a friend or an enemy. “We must love our enemy. We must answer evil with good, curse with blessing. If not, God cannot bless us. When a brother treated you badly, forgive and bless him and pray for him! Answering evil with evil brings us nowhere!” After the words the deed follows. As demanded by the pastor, all people in the church rise and embrace each other with the words: “I love you with the love of Jesus”. Sometimes we are invited to say to our neighbor: “how beautiful you look today!” Or: “you are a blessing, God is glad with you!” During the interviews I discovered that two interviewees, who unlike many others did not come to the Netherlands because of the civil war but for other reasons, described this custom with much more relativism than the others. These two experienced it more as a ritual that does not represent the real relationships within the church. They were more critical about friendships within the church. One said: “In fact I have no real friends within the church. We see each other and work together during the service, our contact is good, but we don’t have friendship. Friendship means 100% trust and helping each other”. The other said: “We embrace each other in the church, but nobody is really interested in me. I have no friends in this church”. Those interviewees with war experience, however, described this love-happening with passion and longing: “This is what the world needs! If all people had lived by this rule! We need to learn this more and more! In the church we learn how to love other people, even those who hurt us”. They affirm having friends within the church. Friends keep them on the right path by going to the same church and doing the right things. These findings give me the impression that this structural love-happening in the church provides for a way to handle the painful and violent past for those who lost their loved ones in the war or had to abandon them by fleeing, without addressing it directly in words. This leaves room for a new way to live

with others in their different approach of friendship, seeming rather a tool for surviving than an answer to a need for warm and trustful relationships.

The third aspect I would like to refer to is the way the church relates 'tithing' with the material needs that these migrant believers generally are facing. Tithing is not so much presented as a way to give money to support the church, but rather as a way to invest in the believers' own life project. In giving money to the God they trust, they expect that he will multiply their gift 30, 60 or a hundred times. In the preaching that surrounds the tithing ritual, the pastor says things like: "who has enough money? Who would like to have more? Who wants a new car? Who wants a new house? If you want to harvest what you desire, you will have to sow first!" People are encouraged to imagine, or as it were already to see the things they are dreaming of, before they prepare their gift and bring it forward. In the interviews, I found nobody who downplayed this way of thinking. For all interviewees this definitely is the way in which God wants to meet their concrete desires in life. All have experiences that -to them- confirm this principle, although these experiences never show the promised multiplication. One woman, who has already lived for thirteen years in The Netherlands, but still has not finished the procedure and lives in hope of a residence permit, said for instance proudly: "I, with my three children, must live from 95 euros a week. Every Thursday I have to go there ¹² to get the money. On every Wednesday I am leader of the cell group, which means that I have to preach the principle of tithing, which is sowing in order to harvest. This means that I must be an example for the others. The Wednesday is the last day before I can get new money. But every week I manage to sow! I don't know how I do it, but I manage. It is God himself, who provides me with this money. Although the money I receive from social service is not much money to feed a family, I never lack money to feed them. That is because I always tithe, because without this, God could not bless me this way". Stories about negative

¹² She means the COA (Centrum voor Opvang Asielzoekers).

financial situations exist as well: “Once I decided not to give 10% of the profit I made with a car deal, because I preferred to pay bills with this money. But after that, when I made a next deal, it went wrong because the papers were incorrect. I am still waiting for a thousand euros now. I know that this is the consequence of my disobedience towards God. Now the devil was able to attack me”. The idea of sowing and harvesting gives these believers the conviction that they are in charge, for the good and for the bad. They can make God help them or the devil harm them. This gives them a schema of thinking in which every (even tiny) positive moment can be appreciated and celebrated as victory over the evil one, who always is after them. In this schema negative moments have a reason and can be overcome.

Conclusion

In concluding I argue that this church meets the needs of its believers in their concrete situation at the problem side, by addressing their concrete problems in every meeting (contextualization) but challenges them to overcome these problems by giving them means that are said to make them independent from their concrete situation (de-contextualization). Although their concrete life shows many elements that make them vulnerable, their repertoire of mastering problems is experienced as successful and victorious. This occurs through the explicit practices like tithing, praying and preaching, but also through the more implicit practices such as forgetting the past and embodying mutual love. All these practices are more or less derived from the central idea of the power of the word, which places the believing subject in the center of the universe.

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