

‘African Churches’ in Europe

Mediating Imaginations

International Conference at the Université libre de Bruxelles

8-10 December 2010, Brussels

‘African Churches’ have been present in Europe for some decades now, but their developments have taken a new dimension with the intensification of African migrations to Europe in the 80s and 90s. Beyond their doctrinal and institutional diversity and divergences, these churches have in common to be carried by African populations who all too often remain stigmatized and marginalized at the social, political and juridical levels. Simultaneously however, they now do compete in an explicit way with historical mission churches, and attract an important proportion of Africans installed in Europe. Depending on the perspective, these churches can alternatively be viewed as a globalized and particularly dynamic contribution to the edification of contemporary Christianities, or as the refuge of ethno-religious communalisms not entirely compatible with European public spaces.

However, ‘African Churches’ in Europe are today at the very heart of transformations of both the imaginations of Europe in the African worlds, and the imaginations of Africa in Europe. They are simultaneously new faces of Africa installed in the heart of European cities and *banlieues* that question the Western contemporary ways of (dis)connecting religion and the public sphere, as well as places of significant reinterpretations of European secular values and practices. As key sites in reshaping European representations of Africa, as well as in remaking African paradigms of Europe, these churches play a crucial role of mediation in the relations between the two continents.

Taking this mediating position of ‘African Churches’ as a point of departure and a general guiding thread, the conference will be organized around four research axes:

[a] **Debated identities:** The entanglement of religious, racial and ethno-national identities in African assemblies in Europe has already generated a series of scholarly debates in the last decade. What forms of (dis)connections between religious and ethno-national affiliations are at work in African Churches of Europe today? What roles do religious identities play in the lives of African Christians in Europe? What room should we make for these religious identities in the sociological or anthropological apprehension of populations of African origin in Europe?

[b] **Networks and circulations of religious actors:** African Churches in Europe are regularly part of different forms of transnational networks where ethno-national identities are combined with religious affiliations. What are the logics of circulation of African ecclesial elites in Europe? How are transnational relations between pastors and between Churches made and unmade? What forms of transnational organization are at work in religious networks, and along which lines do concerns for centralization differ between Churches?

[c] **Relations to the public sphere:** African Churches are often viewed from the angle of abuse and incivility. However, African assemblies are also regularly engaged in public activities aiming at a better public or political recognition, while simultaneously being able to

take distance towards European secular political authorities. What are the different dimensions of the relation to the public sphere in these Churches? Reciprocally, what spaces are carved out in European countries for African Churches?

[d] **Gender(s) issues:** Relations between gender and religious identities have been an important topic of research in social sciences for decades now. In European African Churches, how do questions of masculinity and femininity arise, and in what terms? Are gender relations in these Churches vowed to reproduce the forms of “masculine domination” at work in African societies more broadly? What types of feminine religious power are observable in these assemblies?

From the diverse issues of identity, networks and circulations of religious actors, relations to the public sphere, and gender, contributions to the conference will seek to show how African Christian worlds of Europe are now situated at the very heart of dynamics of reconfiguration of African imaginations of Europe, but also of European imaginations of Africa.

Keynote addresses will be delivered by Rijk Van Dijk (ASC, Leiden) and André Mary (CNRS/EHESS, Paris).

The conference will be organised in four half-day thematic sessions, along the directions of the call for papers. There will be no parallel sessions. Conference participants whose proposals are accepted will be expected to submit papers for pre-circulation for November 1st. A selection of the papers presented at the conference will be published in an edited volume.

The deadline for the submission of proposals (in English or French) is Friday 30 April. One page abstracts should be sent as attached files in word, open office or pdf format to both Maité Maskens (mmaskens@ulb.ac.be) and Joël Noret (jnoret@ulb.ac.be).