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## Conflicting Futures, Entangled Pasts

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# “CONFLICTING FUTURES, ENTANGLED PASTS: NIGERIAN MISSIONARIES IN A POST-SECULAR EUROPE?”<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

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Scholars studying Pentecostalism unite in networks such as the GloPent network (represented by this journal) on the basis of the fact that across the globe, we observe the emergence, growth and evolution of organizations or networks that are similar, yet also quite strongly rooted in the local context. The emergence of missionary activities from Nigeria and other countries of what is often called the ‘Global South’ is a new phase in the history of Pentecostalism that has now been going on for a while. It calls into question the relationship between local contexts and global religious phenomena in new ways. How can we understand these movements as shaped both by ‘local contexts’ (in this case Nigeria), as well as part of a global network of Pentecostal movements? And from there, how can we understand how these movements relate to the ‘local context’ of a country that is a former colonial power (and current resource extractor and job provider, via Shell), namely the Netherlands? With regard to this new phase in the development of global Pentecostalism, it is particularly interesting to focus on how Pentecostal missionaries relate to Europe and how they are shaping the present and future of Europe. I will take a reflexive approach to the question of time and future, because the politics of time in framing the subject of research are equally interesting, as Fabian (1982) already demonstrated in his seminal book ‘Time and the Other’, thus answering the challenge to go beyond Eurocentric framings of our research subjects put forward by post-colonial and decolonial scholars (e.g. Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Seth 2016; Quijano 2000). At the time, Fabian critiqued the rhetorical strategy many anthropologists used in describing their research subjects as if they lived in a different time, even though the main research

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a modified version of the keynote lecture at the 2018 Glopent conference held in Amsterdam: [The Future of Pentecostalism](#). I would like to thank Miranda Klaver, who organized the conference, for the invitation and the inspiring program she put together, and Birgit Meyer, who acted as discussant, for her insightful comments. Furthermore, I would like to thank the other speakers and attendants for the many great conversations and discussions we had: in particular dr Samuel Lee, Miranda Holland, and Jon Bialecki. Finally, many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

technique of anthropologists is based on sharing time. This strategy of placing the Other in the 'there and then' rather than the 'here and now' is deeply embedded within claims to knowledge, as well as claims to know the direction of the future, claims to be representing modernity for others who are 'not yet' modern (Knibbe 2011).

Now that those who might in a previous era been objects of study as Others are reinventing the future for Europe, it is particularly interesting to return to the questions around the politics of time first raised through Fabian's book. To do this, I will take a step back and start by attending to a different sort of question namely: *what do we study when we study Nigerian Pentecostal missionaries in Europe*. Although it may be clear 'who' we study (in terms of self-identification, namely those persons who call themselves both Nigerian and a missionary and who would identify as Pentecostal), the contexts in which we can understand the actions of Nigerian missionaries, the historical trajectories they are part of, as well as the geographical anchoring of the cultural, social and religious contexts keep shifting. Thus, through attending the dimension of time I will explore how this phase in the history of Global Pentecostalism may also give new insights into the new complexities of Europe in terms of religion and secularity.

This question has been at the back of my mind since I started researching this phenomenon in 2007. The project in which this research was conducted was initiated by the GloPent network, in the persons of Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder and André Droogers. Through funding received from NORFACE<sup>2</sup>, they were able to have three researchers (including myself) work on the spread of Nigerian-initiated Pentecostal networks churches and believers in Germany, the UK and the Netherlands. The choice of these countries was both practical, since these are the countries the three project-leaders were based in, but also theoretically interesting: all three are northern European, and in different ways quite secular so an interesting place to study 'reverse mission' and the possible 're-emergence of religion as a social force'.<sup>3</sup> The focus of the research was on

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<sup>2</sup> The project was funded as part of a pilot programme of NORAFCE, around the theme of 're-emergence of religion as a social force in Europe. See <https://www.aka.fi/en/about-us/media/whats-new/2012/Successful-joint-European-research-on-religion-as-a-social-force/>

<sup>3</sup> Anna Quaas, a PhD student, worked on Germany, Richard Burgess worked on the UK and I worked on the Netherlands. We also carried out collaborative research in Nigeria,

three churches in particular: the Redeemed Christian church of God, the Mountain of Fire and Miracles church and the Christ Apostolic Church. Three large churches, very different, but all three also with a large presence in Europe (for some of the outputs of this project see Burgess, Knibbe, and Quaas 2010; Burgess 2008, 2009, 2011; Knibbe 2009, 2010; Knibbe and van der Meulen 2009; Knibbe 2011a, 2011b; Quaas 2011).

Since my research was based in the Netherlands, I came to focus mostly on the RCCG, since this church has a well-established presence in the Netherlands with now around 30 parishes, at that time it was around 20. The RCCG is one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, and by now has a presence in most countries around the world. It has a deliberate church planting strategy, which is also successfully implemented. The campground of this church along the Lagos Ibadan expressway has grown into a small city, with an auditorium that can hold the ever-expanding number of visitors to the monthly Holy Ghost services. Asonzeh Ukah, who wrote an important monograph on the emergence of this church, called it a 'new paradigm of Pentecostal power' (Ukah 2008). It is also the church where Ruth Marshall did much of her research that led to her influential book *Political Spiritualities* (Marshall 2009).

Interestingly, some of the church planting of this church in the three countries was part of a deliberate strategy, carried out by missionaries who were sometimes fully paid, but often also highly educated expats working in Europe (Knibbe 2009; Ukah 2005). Furthermore, this deliberate strategy was particularly visible in the Netherlands, where the RCCG has managed to create a presence in most major cities. In the UK, the RCCG has a much larger presence and mass, while in Germany it seemed they had more trouble creating a presence through a deliberate church planting strategy, although this may have changed now (Burgess, Knibbe, and Quaas 2010; Quaas 2011).

In what follows, I will first discuss the instability and confusion of categories that emerges through a focus on Nigerian missionaries in Europe. I will then suggest a way to choose one particular 'sightline', namely a focus on time. Taking up Butler's question 'what time to we live in?' I will examine the complexities that are involved in answering this question

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visiting the headquarters of several large Nigerian-initiated Pentecostal churches and in through visiting each others research sites.

and discuss how different notions of time both intersect, but also completely miss and ignore each other. Towards the end of the article I will come back to the notion of a post-secular Europe.

#### THE TERMS OF THE QUESTION- TRACING SHIFTS PERSPECTIVES AND ORIENTATIONAL DIMENSIONS

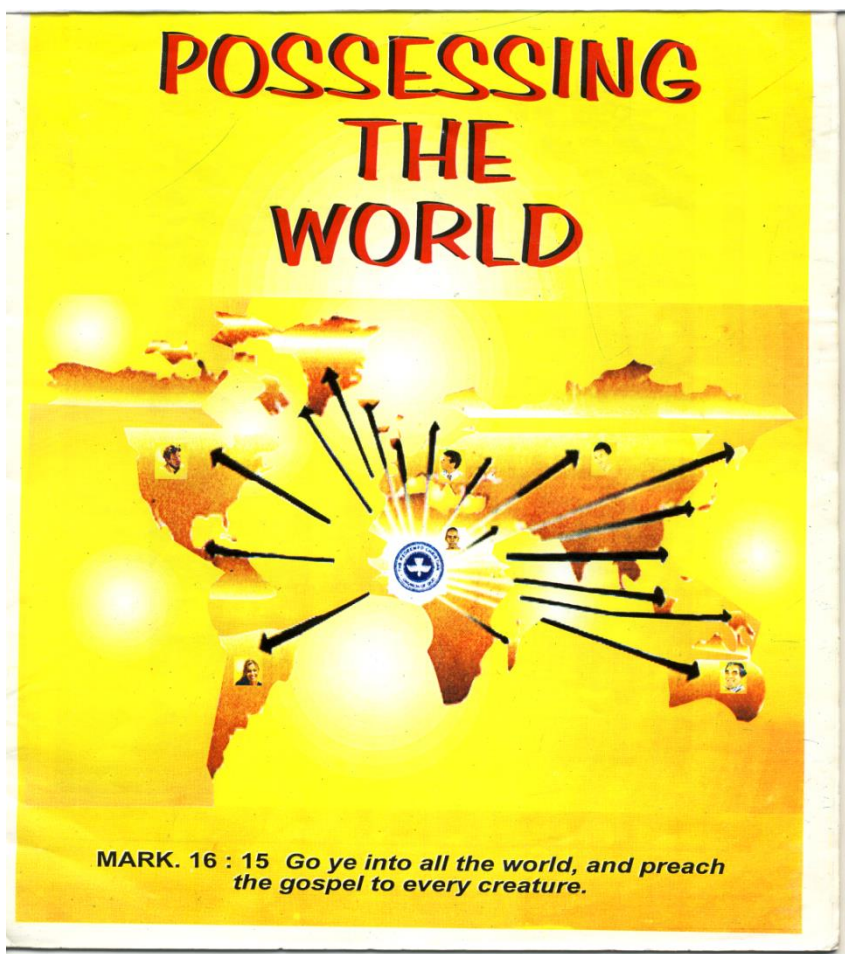
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In the way I formulated the question: **What do we study when we study Nigerian missionaries in Europe?** I have already made certain choices. For example, I speak of Nigerian missionaries. In other scholarly literature, we might encounter the same persons primarily as ‘migrants’, and only in the second instance as missionaries (Stoffels and Jansen 2008; Schiller, Çağlar, and Guldbrandsen 2006, see Währisch-Oblau 2009 for a critical discussion of the classification of migrant in relation to their self-identification as missionaries). Some of the people I refer to as missionaries might identify as expat professionals as well, or students studying for a degree, some indeed as migrants. The identification as a missionary might emerge after migration, through a discovery of God’s plan, or might be the primary reason for coming to Europe.

The notion of Nigerian missionaries in Europe has also caused some scholars to see this as a form of ‘reverse mission’, which is quite evocative of past entanglements and future developments (Burgess 2011; Catto 2008; Afe Adogame 2007, 2006; Ojo 2007; Olofinjana 2010; Währisch-Oblau 2000). It suggests a reversal not only in terms of the direction of missionary engagement, but also in terms of the balance of power, particularly in the connection that is often made with the notion that the centre of gravity within Global Christianity has shifted to the Global South (Jenkins 2007; Sanneh and Carpenter 2005). Depending on one’s confessional outlook, this is cause for excitement or worry. However, as Ukah, Freston and others, including myself have pointed out, this notion of reverse mission is quite problematic (Paul Freston 2010; Knibbe 2011b; Ukah 2005).

The missionaries I spoke to did not employ the terminology of *reverse* mission, they simply use the term mission. Nevertheless, as I will outline later, there was a recognition of the contradictions and ironies of Nigerian missionaries bringing the gospel ‘back’ to Europe, and a recognition of Europe as an origin point of missionaries in the past (Burgess

2011). Yet, in a manner perhaps typical of Pentecostalism, this past was simultaneously invoked and deemed irrelevant to the present time, looking forward to an eschatological future (Coleman 2011). The omission of the term 'reverse' in the self-descriptions of Pentecostal missionaries, in my view, is significant also with regard to their positionality. One could argue that the term 'reverse mission' also implies a particular situated perspective and notion of history: based in Europe, in European historical trajectories and representations of the world. By contrast, this map,<sup>4</sup> which I always show when I give a talk on this subject, immediately makes clear the situated perspective from which the world is viewed by the RCCG: Nigeria.



Please note, by the way, that this map in fact implies two perspectives: aside from positing Nigeria as the origin point, it also implies a perspective based in the sky, a God's eye point

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<sup>4</sup> This image is taken from the magazine handed out during the Eurocon meeting of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Madrid, 2009, collected by Anna Quaas, who attended the meeting.

of view so to speak, as most modern maps do, implying an objectification of the world, a flattening of the globe onto a two-dimensional plane. This sort of objectification generally leads to action: the proverbial white spots on the maps in colonial times led explorers to 'penetrate' the wilderness, and missionaries to spread the gospel, whereas this map encourages covering the areas where the RCCG does not yet have a strong presence while at the same time proclaiming its global stature and reach. This is related to the mission statement of the RCCG, which aims to have a location of the RCCG within 5 minutes driving or walking distance across the world, so that when the end time begins, people can quickly reach a place where they can give their life to Jesus and be saved. Hence the positioning in terms of both location and time represented by this map and the mission statement, there is nothing explicitly 'reverse' about the self-understanding of the RCCG mission to Europe. Nevertheless, the power of this image also lies in its use of the trope of a map, with its long history in missionary activities originating in Europe and the US. The use of the map thus repeats the double move of both invoking and deeming irrelevant historically Eurocentric missionary movements. This brings me to the geographical indicators I employ in this question. 'Nigerian', an indication of nationality, and 'Europe', a much vaguer indicator of a particular region. Nigerian refers to the nation state, although it is quite doubtful that Nigeria can actually be called a nation, given its diversity in terms of language, ethnicity and religion (Bah 2005; Ifeka 2000; Suberu 2009). Nigeria is an artefact of colonial history, and has since decolonization been continuously recreated through painful wars and conflicts, but also through football, schools, and elections. In practice, many of the missionaries I spoke to were actually Yoruba. But not all. Within the rhetoric of the RCCG it is Nigeria, as a collective representation, an imagined community at work in this map here, not Yorubaland .

'Europe' is also an idea, or, actually, a variety of ideas, a contested idea (see e.g. Chakrabarty 2009). When we say 'Europe' is that a place Nigerian missionaries are part of, or are they 'alien'? The answer to this question often also indicates the kind of future one has in mind. If they are part of Europe, then that means Europe now is a different place from the Europe before the rise of Nigerian Pentecostal churches, and Europeans, nationals of various countries, policy makers, politicians, need to take this into account. So is Europe then a post-secular region? What does that mean?

If they are considered ‘alien’, migrants, then something should be done in terms of ‘integration’, which in current debates seems to come closer to the notion of assimilation, in the ways it distributes responsibilities mostly towards the ‘migrant’. And usually, this means shedding ones ‘religious baggage’, as it is actually called in some Dutch literature and scholarship. Or, in a more worrying vein, current political rhetoric emphasizes that ‘they’ should just go ‘back to where they came from’. In this political rhetoric, discourses on secularism, on migration, race and gender often intersect (Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016; Scott 2017; Bracke and Fadil 2012, 2008). Usually, the conflation of an anti-immigration with a post-feminist and homo-nationalist discourse is particularly targeted at Muslims, although, as I show elsewhere, this also may come to be applied to Christian migrants (Knibbe 2018).

However, if Europe is conceptualized as a ‘dark continent’, then obviously, it needs to be evangelized, as Nigerian missionaries are doing (Olofinjana 2010). If darkness is descending on Europe, which was the message of pastor Agu at the 2017 European Convention of the RCCG held in Amsterdam, then we need an army of God to save Europe. At this same convention, attended by pastors and missionaries of the RCCG from all over Europe, pastor Agu led those attending into a promise of accepting God’s plan for them in Europe, a meeting that culminated in a crescendo of all those attending kneeling down and dedicating themselves to be part of God’s standing army in Europe, ready for the end of times (the notion of a darkness descending on Europe has become a recurring theme also at other major Dutch events (co-) organized by the RCCG).

Thus, this conceptualization or mapping leads to a particular course of action, mobilizing of resources, distribution of people and practices, as well as place making (Knibbe 2009, 2010). All this activity also creates new kinds of spaces, as Coleman and Maier have argued, namely, among the people they did research with, the stretched city space of “London-Lagos” (Coleman and Maier 2013).

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#### TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FIELDS AND TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL ACTORS

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This ties in with the scholarship on ‘transnational social fields’, drawing on the Bourdieuan notion of social fields and going beyond methodological nationalism to conceive of new units of social analysis in migration studies that takes into account the



continuing relationships and circulation of people, goods and ideas connecting different locations (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Adogame 2010). Indeed, the missionaries of the RCCG fly all over the world. On church business, but also on work business, on educational business, family business etc.. If we consider the RCCG to be one particular social field, the question arises how it relates to other social fields? And how do these transnational social fields relate to local contexts? Do they negate the importance of national borders and nation states? Hardly, as those with the wrong passport can attest. However, the rise of transnationalism does destabilize the taken-for-grantedness of the borders of the nation state, or the borders of Europe (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).

In addition to this notion of a transnational social field, I think it is justified to conceptualize the RCCG as a transnational institutional actor, which organizes people not only through certain practices of mediation (Meyer 2011), but also through ways of mapping the world, creating spiritual parenting relationships through which new missionaries come to be called by God and are mentored to plant churches, through directing flows of money, people, buying buildings, creating weekly and yearly routines, setting up educational programmes, hierarchies and ranks etc etc.. Moreover, it is an institutional actor that explicitly aims to change Europe and is doing so both materially, through planting churches, socially, through creating new spaces and places, and spiritually, through prayer and evangelizing.

So what do we study when we study Nigerian missionaries in Europe? We may study various ways of mapping the world, and taking action both on the level of the individual and on the level of globally networked institutional actors. We may study the creation of new places and spaces, of different possible (future) Europes.

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#### PLURALISM, INVISIBILITY AND DISJUNCTURES

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However, rather than assuming this all to come together in some sort of hybrid, colorful new Europe, in my view it is important to recognize the ways that all these activities, spaces and places that are created may exist side by side without being aware of each other. The Europe of many ‘Dutch Dutch’<sup>5</sup> is not the Europe of a Nigerian missionary. And,

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘Dutch Dutch’ was used by several leaders of the RCCG Netherlands to indicate ‘white Dutch’, to distinguish this population from Dutch citizens with a Caribbean

in the current constellations, in most cases Nigerian missionaries will have a better idea of how the Dutch think, than vice-versa. In fact, among most Dutch, the appearance of the possibility of Nigerian missionaries in Europe provokes shock, laughter and sometimes ridicule as I have found through the countless presentations I have given on this subject over the years.

So how do we anchor the multiplicity that characterizes the social, cultural and historical realities in which the RCCG as an institutional actor finds itself in Europe? All this talk of different Europes, different representations, different pasts and futures may sound unsettlingly post-modern, where everything is multiple and fluid, and up in the air, signifiers unmoored from signifieds, the kind of 1990s post-structuralism that is exemplified in the influential collection of essays of Appadurai 'Modernity at Large' (Appadurai 1996). While this collection of essays, and many others like it, has done important work in breaking open the frames of reference then prevailing, I would like to propose that it is time to become more precise again, although in new ways. How do we delineate more precisely the disjunctures that become visible through following the ways that Nigerian missionaries may be part of different categories or may even be completely invisible?

In attempting to become more precise in delineating the intersections and disjunctures, I found myself following several different vectors, which I have come to refer to as 'orientational dimensions', taking a phenomenological point of departure to understand the ways that we engage with the world, through our embodied being in the world (Merleau-Ponty and Smith 1996; Csordas 1994). Through following a particular orientational dimension, such as time or space, from different positions, we may come to see how different lifeworlds may exist side by side without those involved in them being very much aware of each other's existence. Attending to these orientational dimensions may also throw light onto how different lifeworlds may come together and the encounters, misunderstandings and new understandings that emerge from these encounters.

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background (often people of color), who also made up a substantial part of the population of a parish in some cases.

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## WHAT TIME DO WE LIVE IN?

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In previous publications I have variously zoomed in on embodiment (Knibbe 2011a), place, spatial practices and mapping (Knibbe 2009, 2010) and the different notions of history and modernity that are at stake in the encounter between Nigerian missionaries and the Dutch secular context (Knibbe 2011b). Below, I want to continue to explore the notion of time in some more detail, taking as a point of departure the seemingly ‘simple’ question that Judith Butler has posed, namely ‘what time do we live in’, who is seen to have arrived in modernity and who has not (yet) arrived there (Butler 2008, 1). These questions are, as I will show, also at the heart of both the disjunctures and encounters between Nigerian missionaries and Europe.

In the following, I will confine myself to the Dutch context because, despite calls to go beyond methodological nationalism, the nation state is still very much a relevant unit of analysis when it comes to understanding the intersections and disjunctures that emerge in the encounter between Nigerian Pentecostals and the European contexts. Within the NORFACE project, we found significant differences between national contexts (Burgess, Knibbe, and Quaas 2010). This has to do with the different ways societies are structured, and in particular with the different forms of secularism and secularity prevalent (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012). Furthermore, there are of course important differences in the ways Nigerian missionaries relate to the various context emerging out of the history of colonialism, with the UK as the colonial power in relation to present-day Nigeria.

So how does this notion of studying intersections and disjunctures by following orientational dimensions work out? In what follows, I will focus on the sense of history espoused by the Redeemed Christian Church of God, as an institutional actor emerging out of the context of post-colonial Nigeria on the one hand, and the sense of history that one can find in the particular form Dutch secularity takes on, and how these inform attitudes and encounters, when they take place at all.

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## DARK PASTS, BRIGHT MODERNITIES

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The notion of history of the RCCG is anchored by the time of the prophets and Jesus Christ. One of the slogans of the church is “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and

tomorrow". This is usually explained as the promise that the miracles that happened during the time of Jesus are still happening today, a key tenet of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. Preaching often centres around the old-testament prophets. The prophets of Elija and Elisha are often referred to in the historical narratives around the change in leadership in the RCCG. Another important anchoring point in the foundation narratives of the RCCG is the emergence of the church as a covenant church, which God has promised to take to all nations on earth. This covenant was revealed to the founder of the church, Akindayomi. Yet, as Ukah argued, it is important to note that in terms of charismatic leadership, the RCCG was re-founded under the leadership of Adeboye who came to be the established leader in the early eighties (Ukah 2008, chap. 3). Under his leadership, the RCCG changed quite strongly and became the global player that it is today, associated with a distinctly modern and globalized lifestyle, often taking vocabularies and ideas from management literature as easily as from the bible. Around the role of Adeboye another mythology has developed, which is embodied in the numerous films, hagiographies and other materials the church has developed.

In an earlier publication (Knibbe 2011b, 471), I highlighted the following quote, taken from a hagiography of Adeboye:

The lamp was lit in the dark heart of the African jungle, but before the environment could acknowledge its glow, strong winds were swirling around its flame to snuff it out. It took God to preserve this bright lamp. <sup>6</sup>

This view of 'the African jungle' seems to repeat quite racist rhetoric on Africa as the dark continent that has been criticized within postcolonial theory, anthropology, and also already in 1961 by one of Nigeria's foremost authors, Chinua Achebe (Achebe 1961). However, this image forms a quite common and useful backdrop to serve up the glorious success story of the RCCG, as in this hagiography: Adeboye became the head of one of the largest Pentecostal churches worldwide, with millions of followers. This reference to darkness when talking both of Africa and the past is quite common among Nigerian Pentecostals: they often referred to their perception of Europe as wealthy and

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<sup>6</sup> Tony Ojo, *Let Somebody Shout Hallelujah! The Life and Ministry of E. A. Adeboye* (Lagos: Honeycombs cards and prints, 2001), preface

comfortable, in contrast to Nigeria which they saw as 'backward.' It is also evident in the notion of the 'model parishes' that was pioneered by some pastors in the wealthier parts of Lagos, and soon became the standard for parishes worldwide: aiming at young professionals, a branch would be started by renting space in a western style hotel such as the Hilton, from where a parish would purchase its own premises as soon as it became financially viable through tithing and donations. Although in practice, many branches start out by renting a space in a community hall, unused office or from an established church, whenever possible this pattern of establishing a 'model parish' was followed in the Netherlands, Germany and the UK.

So while this talk of Africa as backward is something that deserves to be critiqued as contributing to the unequal distribution of power, knowledge and authority, the question that needs to be asked is; what does this kind of talk, this idea of 'Africa' as backward and heathen accomplish when it is employed by Nigerian Pentecostals? This is a question also addressed by Ruth Marshall, in her seminal book on the Nigerian Pentecostal Revolution, in which the RCCG figures prominently (Marshall 2009). She quite sharply takes anthropologists to task for not having taken the rise of Pentecostalism seriously as a phenomenon in its own right, but have rather, often influenced by neo-marxist analyses, framed it as a reaction to the incursion of capitalism and neoliberalism, lamenting the departure from 'authentic' African traditions (Marshall 2009, 22–35). Although I think that most anthropologists studying Pentecostalism have long abandoned that sort of nostalgia, I agree with her that we should understand the Pentecostal revolution as arising out of the particular history of Nigeria, and the system of distinctions that has emerged out of the colonial period and the post-colonial disappointments and trials (Marshall 2009, chap. 2).

A critique that parallels that of Marshall, is that of David Smilde. In his ethnography of evangelicalism in Venezuela he outlines even more sharply the neo-marxist reductionism that sometimes underlies anthropological and sociological analyses of Pentecostalism and evangelicalism as a 'response' to societal conditions and economic malaise. He proposes to understand evangelicalism as a form of cultural agency, it is a way that people 'get things done with culture'. Although Ruth Marshall employs a very different (mainly Foucauldian) language, their critiques converge when it comes to the analysis of the rise of Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism: rather than seeing these as

epiphenomena of processes such as the globalization of capitalism, we should understand their popularity in terms of what people want to accomplish through becoming born again and living a holy life.

So what does the image of a dark and backward Africa such as that put forward in the hagiography of Adeboye accomplish? The Nigerian Pentecostal idea of modernity is entangled with the notion of Africa as historically heathen, 'not yet' Christian, and 'not yet' modern. The Pentecostal churches of Nigeria, the RCCG foremost among them, quite deliberately build up a particular form of modern society, both in terms of the material facilities that are built and expanded and rebuilt, as well as the educational facilities that are developed, and of course the global outlook on the world that one becomes steeped in. Thus, as Birgit Meyer, Peter van der Veer and others have argued, a conversion to Christianity is also a conversion to modernity (Van der Veer 1996).

This is in sharp contrast to the Dutch notion of modernity as it has emerged since the 1960s, which is quite secularist. Underlying this is a notion of the recent history of the Netherlands, particularly the 1960s, as the period when the Dutch liberated themselves from religion (Van der Veer 2006; Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Kennedy 1995). Historically, the Netherlands seems a textbook case to illustrate the secularization thesis: rising educational levels, rising living standards and the Dutch system of religious pluralism, pillarization, crumbled (e.g. Becker and Vink 1994; Becker and de Wit 2000; Halman et al. 1987). To many Dutch, any form of organized religion is by definition oppressive and conservative, particularly in terms of sexuality, personal development and freedom. Interestingly, there is a claim here also of neutrality: through liberating themselves from the religious past, the Dutch have also become more of an authority, because they are neutral. The trope of 'breaking taboos' is very important here: through this breaking of taboos, through the sexual revolution in particular, the Dutch have shed their religious and cultural shackles and can now see through all the ways that 'others' are still bound by them. Here indeed, the Dutch see themselves as inhabiting a different time than those who are 'still' religious.

So what happens when these two historical trajectories – and arguably, projects- intersect? This is the question underlying a current research project on religious and secular approaches to sexual well-being that I am currently directing with Rachel Spronk.<sup>7</sup> This project has its roots in a controversy that took place around 2008-2009, when the media reported that there seemed to be HIV-healings taking place in the South-East of Amsterdam, an area where many Pentecostal churches have sprung up in the past decades, including a parish of the RCCG. In analysing this controversy, it is striking that the terms in which this controversy was cast kept shifting, like I was shifting around the terms in the first part of this article: it started with the story that in some Surinam churches, people thought they had been healed of HIV and homosexuality. From there, the story developed to variously encompass ‘black churches’, Pentecostal churches, Ghanaian churches, African Pentecostal churches and so on (K. E. Knibbe 2018).

At the time this controversy played out in the media, I was conducting fieldwork in the part of town that is home to most of the churches encompassed by these shifting categories. Two things that characterized the media accounts surprised me: the alarmist tone as well as the gross misunderstandings of what goes on in Pentecostal churches. Although clearly, within many Pentecostal churches, homosexuality will be met with disapproval, and the thought that the Holy Spirit can heal any disease (including HIV) is ubiquitous in these circles, I was aware of several working groups of church leaders addressing HIV/AIDS and of a recent choir competition initiated by a public health organization, where church choirs in the South East of Amsterdam had competed to produce the best songs on the topic to raise awareness, which had resulted in a CD that was quite popular.<sup>8</sup> So it seemed strange that there could be such a moral panic around a topic on which there was already quite some practical engagement between Pentecostal and public health actors.

Interestingly, in the news coverage of this issue, the rhetoric employed seemed to draw on similar contrasts between tradition, folklore, past and darkness and modernity, science, brightness. A local councilor spoke of a ‘dark and unknown side of the city’

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<sup>7</sup> For more information see [www.culturalencounters.nl](http://www.culturalencounters.nl)

<sup>8</sup> ; it was often played in the community centre where I taught Dutch, for example. See [http://www.hivnet.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5926&Itemid=162](http://www.hivnet.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5926&Itemid=162) accessed 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2016

(Bosman 2009).<sup>9</sup> Later, this was modified to the more innocent ‘folklore’. Thus, the Dutch secular outlook on healing in Pentecostal churches placed this practice in the past, and in the ‘dark’, rather than in the bright light of modernity that the Pentecostals themselves place themselves in, as we saw in the hagiography of Adeboye. Throughout the whole media storm, it never became clear whether events focused on healing homosexuality or HIV actually took place, in the sense that journalists, the local councilor and the Dutch LGBTQ rights organization COC spoke of them. In fact, the Dutch inspectorate for health never found any evidence that they did. As I argued in an article discussing this controversy, the effect of media attention was that certain practices were decontextualized and slotted into familiar schemes of tradition vs modernity, ‘dark’ vs ‘light’ that evoked racial stereotypes from what Wekker calls the Dutch cultural archive (Knibbe 2018; Wekker 2016).

It is important to note, however, that the ways these two notions of modernity played out is not inevitable. Whereas in the Netherlands, the notion that religion is in decline is quite pervasive and thus those who are ‘too’ religious are often placed in a position of having to prove they are not backward, the perception of black churches and in particular Nigerian churches among media, policy-makers and politicians is quite different. As Williams describes for Cameron, politicians in the UK are now also employing the ‘God strategy’, emphasizing the UK to be a Christian Nation. This leads to the interesting convergence of power strategies (of a politician on the one hand and the RCCG on the other hand) exemplified by Cameron’s appearance during an RCCG event (Williams 2018). Furthermore, as one reviewer remarked, this encounter might play out very differently where it concerns Catholic or Methodist missionaries from the Global South. However, as Konings has shown for Ghanaian Seventh-Day Adventists, racial categories do play a role in encounters between Ghanaian and Dutch Seventh-Day Adventists as well (Koning 2009).

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#### DISCUSSION: IS EUROPE POST-SECULAR? OR POST-COLONIAL?

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<sup>9</sup> "Hiv-healings behoren tot de duistere praktijken van de stad [...] We duiken er nu diep in. [...] We willen de kerkgemeenschappen hun folklore niet afnemen, maar we willen wel duidelijk maken dat ze mensen met hiv ook moeten doorsturen naar de reguliere zorg."



The analysis of the HIV-healing controversy shows that the question 'what time do we live in' provides an interesting entrance into the different historical trajectories and the life worlds that they create, but also the differences that are enacted within a plural, post-colonial Europe. A first observation is of course that much depends on who is included and who is excluded in the 'we' in question. Furthermore, in the encounter as it played out around the HIV-healings, a parallel question comes to the forefront, namely 'what time do others live in?' The answers to these two questions inform the different notions of history that shape the RCCG as an institutional actor, promoting a particular form of Christianity centered on charismatic practices, including healing on the one hand, and the Dutch secular context of governance and media on the other hand. In the ways this controversy played out, the point of view of the churches that were included in the changing categories in which the controversy was cast did not receive any attention in the Dutch media.

Will this change? Will these different historical trajectories eventually merge into one to form a new kind of society? With this question, we are back to one of the terms used in the first question, posed at the beginning of this article: what do we study when we study Nigerian Pentecostals in Europe. What kind of 'unit of analysis' is Europe? Can we go beyond representations of Europe as either the cradle of modernity or the present-day 'dark continent' of Nigerian missionary imagination, towards a post-secular future for Europe?

The fractured lines for future developments certainly are one of the major causes for the heated political debates in Europe and the US. It would seem that Europe is becoming post-colonial: the myth of modernity, as an overarching narrative, is not working anymore. Yet, modernity is still at work in the structures, perceptions and dispositions of those who service the structures of nation states. This is what we see in our current research into the ways sexual health organizations approach people with a religious, migrant background. They are seen as people who are 'still' religious, implying that better integration will result in a decline of religious conviction and fervor, thus creating a 'non-Europe' within Europe (Bhabra 2009).

The dynamics of the controversy around the HIV-healings seem to suggest that in this instance we cannot speak of a post-secular society: the churches are better off being ignored, because when they were engaged with, this was done from a position of

superiority that many pastors found offensive. Nevertheless, we also find instances of productive engagement, especially around issues of health more generally rather than specifically sexual health and sexual orientation (e.g. Agyemang et. al. 2018).

The question of post-secular or post-colonial also points towards the question what time 'we', academics, live in. Who are the academics studying Pentecostalism in Europe and what time horizons do they employ? As evident from the references used in this article, the 'we' invoked here is not strictly European, yet one might argue that most (including myself, a "Dutch Dutch" scholar) implicitly reference, even while critiquing, a Eurocentric perspective on history that assumes Christianity to be in decline, but is fascinated by the rise of Christianity in the Global South and is weighing mentally what this means: a triumph of religion, the advent of a post-secular era, or the last gasp before the advent of secular modernity? As we saw in the controversy around the HIV-healings, Europe is both secular and religious, and only in some moments and places post-secular. However, it is certainly, at least in terms of historical period, post-colonial. Furthermore, it is post-colonial in the sense that the different groups encountering each other all embody, reference and deploy representations marked by entangled colonial histories, continuously present as a 'cultural archive' (Wekker 2016). As some scholars would argue, modernity cannot be understood without its shadow side of coloniality (Grosfoguel 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

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#### IN CONCLUSION:

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What do we study when we study Nigerian missionaries in Europe? We study cultural encounters between units that keep shifting shape in a space marked by entangled colonial and missionary histories and divergent notions of the future. But perhaps even more often, we study the non-encounters that take place. The encounter that emerged around the notion of HIV healings did not proceed from any kind of real understanding. While my focus was on Nigerian missionaries, they became part of other categories and notions about them that affected them, but were based on particularly Dutch, secular histories of liberation from religion.

Attending to the concepts and practices related to the orientational dimension of time can provide us with one vector along which to slice the complexities of European post-colonial

society and the ways academics orient themselves within this complexity, not reifying or assuming an organizational, cultural or religious homogeneity. Attending to orientational dimensions in a comparative mode takes into account the ways that any particular place is multiple, made up of overlapping social fields that stretch beyond the geographical boundaries of the Netherlands and Europe. In answering the question of what time do we live in, we can be precise, and attend to the question of who is the 'we' implied in that question, the differences in positioning, personal, organizational and national trajectories that constitute this 'we', and the ways differences in orientation with regard to history, time, but also with regard to space, and embodiment structure relationships between groups of people. It also shows the forms of power, empowerment and disempowerment that may be at stake in the answers to this question.

So how about the future of the study of Pentecostalism. In my view, working towards a more complex understanding of the intersections of Pentecostal worlds with other contexts, structures and processes is an important way forward to unsettling Eurocentric narratives of history, modernity and religious dynamics. So much excellent work has already been done in this field tracing the history, rise and evolution of Pentecostalism across different contexts, and wonderful ethnographic work that shows how Pentecostalism responds to and creates new opportunities and dynamics in local contexts. Building on this work the study of Pentecostalism can provide the various disciplines in which they are embedded (religious studies, anthropology, sociology, theology, mission studies) with the material to theorize more specifically how religious worlds intersect and create disjunctures with other contexts.

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