

Praenotandum

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‘THE TREE THAT SAW IT ALL’

Gerrie ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise: African Christians in Europe*. Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998, vi + 220 pp., ISBN 1-899025-03-0, £ 16,95.

In the early evening of Sunday 4 October 1992, just after Ter Haar had started her four year research on the subject of this book, an El Al 747 freighter plane crashed on two flats in the Bijlmer, a suburb of Amsterdam in the flight path to *Schiphol* Airport. Destroying several storeys, it set off a blaze in which at least 43 people were killed. The tragedy united the *Bijlmer* inhabitants, Dutch and non-Dutch alike, in grief. A spot nearby was spontaneously converted into a ritual space for commemorating the victims. At its centre is a large tree which had survived unscathed. It is now known locally as ‘the tree that saw it all’ (42, n.19).

Among the victims were several Ghanaians, some of whom lived there as ‘undocumented’ residents, *i.e.* without residence and work permits (116-120). ‘It is widely believed’, Ter Haar (42) writes, ‘that the real number of dead was higher, possibly much higher, because of the number of illegal immigrants and others living clandestinely or without proper authorisation in some of the flats which were destroyed’. The press exposure of the events made the Dutch aware of the cosmopolitan character of this part of Amsterdam with its 60.000 residents from ‘no less than 70 different nationalities’ (34), and of the large number of Ghanaians living there, some with, and many without, permits. But it also showed that religious life, Christian and other, was thriving in the Bijlmer – a remarkable fact for the Dutch whose society is rapidly secularising – and that these religious communities served important social functions for the new residents, not only in this time of grief but especially in surviving and getting settled in Dutch society which, as part of ‘fortress Europe’, is ever more intent on restricting admission.

In the early 1980s, when Ghana was hit by severe droughts and Nigeria expelled great numbers of Ghanaians, young Ghanaian males, and soon also young females, mainly from Twi-speaking areas, began to travel in numbers to Europe and Northern America in a tradition, well established all over Africa but especially so in Southern Ghana, of migration for the purpose of seeking employment and economic success elsewhere (4, 73-76, 87, 132-133, 135ff.), because the political and economic situation in Ghana itself was in a poor shape (81, 133-134, 150). On the continent of Europe, Germany and The Netherlands have proved main destinations. The Netherlands now has slightly over 15,000 Ghanaians with permits and a few, perhaps several,

thousands more without documents (126). They have flocked mainly to the cities of Rotterdam, The Hague, and Amsterdam, and in the latter city especially to the Bijlmer; in Germany, many have congregated in Hamburg. Their presence is generally not a conspicuous one (126-127). The undocumented especially manage to survive only with great difficulty by menial jobs which often require them to work at ungodly hours, and by relying on their informal networks to survive when all other means fail (126).

One trait has, however, become noticeable: the great number of AICs, 'African Initiated Churches', that have sprung up among them. In Amsterdam, some forty existed in 1997, most of them founded by Ghanaians. These churches are the main subject of study of Ter Haar's book, and more in particular The True Teachings of Christ's Temple church in the Bijlmer, the oldest and largest of these congregations in Amsterdam with some 600 regular members. It grew since the early 1980s from the ministrations of Daniel Himmans-Arday, born in Agogo, Ashanti, in 1943 and raised as a Methodist (30-33). This, and most other AICs in the Netherlands belong to the evangelical tradition with its outspoken belief in the Bible as the unique message of salvation for all humankind and persistent emphasis on the need for a personal conversion. 'Challenging Western Christianity on its home territory' (8), they practise the 'reverse mission' of preaching the need to convert to secularist Europe (1-3, 12-17). They are churches of the enthusiast, Pentecostal/charismatic kind, known in Ghana also as the 'spiritual churches' (*sunsum asore*), in which faith healing is prominent (17-21, 25-26). Furthermore, like the newest AICs ('African Indigenous, African Instituted, or African Initiated, Churches') in Africa, the AICs in Europe are very much 'African International Churches' (21-25, 178-180). They aspire 'to be part of the international world in which they believe themselves to have a universal task' (24). Spreading through Europe now and back to Ghana (33), they are part of both European and African church history, and, as in the days of the slave trade, reflect 'today's triangular flow of ideas between Africa, the Americas and Europe' (6).

Ter Haar's book has ten chapters. Chapter 1 is a methodological introduction in which she critically discusses the concepts scholars use in their description of African Christianity. She highlights the subtle mechanisms of exclusion operating in *e.g.* an emphasis on its 'Africanness'. Against symbolist anthropologists, she insists that their theologies should also be studied in order to properly understand their important social functions for their members (6-7, 10-12). In chapters 2, she looks at the Bijlmer, its religious communities and their social functions. She contends that 'religious faith can also constitute a successful social strategy' (45). It creates a sense of belonging, and a place at which one is 'at home' for many migrants. How precisely their bible-centred approach creates a supportive, inclusive community is analysed in chapter 3, in which Ter Haar also examines their notions of 'spirit', 'power' and 'prosperity', and the role of ritual in obtaining one's share in them in the liminality of the diaspora. In chapter 4, she surveys the history, past and present, of that 'dispersal' of Africans outside Africa. She also takes a critical look at the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion inherent in the uses of the concept of diaspora. They may serve to exclude especially when its three key notions of dispersal (forced or voluntary), cultivation of an 'African'

identity, and the wish to return 'home' (80), are attributed to the migrants but not cultivated by the migrants themselves, as is the case with many migrants into Europe. This concept, and other attributions, then become the subtle but effective instruments of separation and exclusion used against them by the 'native' residents and churches of Europe (82-88, 159-167). The history and present distribution of the AICs in Europe is examined in chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses the attempts of 'fortress Europe' to stem what it perceives as the 'flood' of immigrants, particularly the so called 'economic refugees' without permits, often smuggled in by human trafficking. The 'exodus' from Africa to Europe is discussed in greater detail in chapter 7 with an emphasis on the migrants from Ghana and their cultural organisations in the Netherlands. The reactions of the mainline churches in the Netherlands and in Ghana to this phenomenon are studied in chapter 8, as is that of a Ghanaian Pentecostal church, the Resurrection Power and Living Bread Ministries, which established a branch in Amsterdam and is now one of the larger AICs there. The Dutch mainline churches have emphasised the Africanness of the AICs. By that label, they have provided 'themselves with an opportunity to distance themselves' from the AICs in Europe by 'othering' them. That is, says Ter Haar, the more prevalent mode of modern racism (161-167). In chapter 9, Ter Haar surveys the history of Christianity in Ghana, including its bewildering variety of AICs, the major influence in the religious developments among Ghanaians in Europe. She points out that 'fundamentalism' is another of the several dubious categories and labels that have bedevilled the study of AICs (185-188). In chapter 10, she concludes the book by showing from the example of the Bijlmer that AICs do have an important social function for migrants from Africa in the modern cities of Europe.

This is a well-written and excellently documented book with a sure grasp of both long range historical developments and the baffling complexities of the present day situation, religious and political. I have two reservations. One is that the 'reverse mission' seems, so far, to be for internal use only. It seems to serve as one of several optional means of identity construction by which a 'community of elect' may separate itself ideologically from 'immoral' Western society into which it fervently wishes to integrate economically. The other reservation respects Ter Haar's somewhat indiscriminate polemics against the social-scientific studies of AICs in Africa and Europe by 'secular' anthropologists who adopt a symbolist approach in the study of religions. In her view, they 'consider religious belief and religious practice as mere representations of the secular' (5, 6; also 7, 9, 10, 164). Though she is correct to emphasise with Horton (8-12) that their religious notions and rituals need to be studied both for their own sake and for the social functions they serve, I feel more at ease with her admission that 'the study of religious phenomena in Africa [as] a branch of scientific inquiry [...] has been revolutionised by the insights of anthropology' (8). That includes, in my view, those of several 'symbolists'.

All in all, however, this is a lucid book on an important development in the history of both African and European religiosity. It lays bare some of the well-hidden mechanisms of identity construction as a means for survival as well as for 'othering' in order to separate, exclude and expulse. It is important for the academic study of religions both for its substance and the methodology it advocates.