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Ghanaians in Amsterdam, their 'good work back home' and the importance of reciprocity¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the particular and strategic roles, which migrants play in the development of their country of origin, notably their rural 'hometowns'. It is based on a multi-sited, contemporaneous study in cultural economics, that explores the influence of transnational ties between Ghanaian migrants in Amsterdam with individual and collective actors in Ghana, notably in rural Ashanti communities. This paper highlights the role of institutions, linking communities living abroad to their people back home, or broader: in the home country. In this contribution two of these, inter-linked, institutions get special attention; community development and funerals.

Key words: international migration, transnational networks, community development, funerals, Ashanti, Ghana, Amsterdam

Transnational networks

In the current era of globalisation many people around the globe are connected through transnational networks. Particularly international migrants live lives in which not a stable, localised living environment determines their geographical life histories, but a very fluid, multi-sited combination of living spaces, often across large distances. People no longer 'belong' to one place, and no longer feel connected to only one major place or country. They at least have a double engagement (Mazzucato, 2005 and 2008). They often connect to two or more countries, and maintain economic and social relationships in two or more countries or even continents. In the political arena politicians and the media are struggling with this phenomenon. Concepts like 'multi-culturality' and 'transnational citizenship' were coined to embrace the reality of people whose allegiances are diverse, and who combine orientations from a variety of cultures (Worldconnectors, 2007). In nationalist circles in Europe and elsewhere the concept became a 'hate concept'; political entrepreneurs, who mobilise fear for 'the other', use it to spit on it, and to demand national(ist) 'clarity': migrants should declare their allegiance to the host culture, should refrain from having more than one passport, and should integrate in the host culture; or leave.

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Social scientists are struggling with these changing realities as well. In a recent research project connecting the Netherlands and Ghana we used the concept of 'transnational networks' to design a method of coping with this phenomenon. A transnational network is a migrant, and those people with whom he/she transacts during a certain period. Another methodological innovation that was explored was a so-called multi-sited research design: at the same time doing research in places that are connecting the lives of international migrants and the people in their transnational network. This has subsequently been labeled a 'simultaneous matched- sample approach' (Mazzucato, 2009b). In our research project these connected places were mainly Amsterdam, Accra, Kumasi, and hamlets, villages and small towns in the Ashanti area in Ghana. Three full-time researchers did most of the research work, Mirjam Kabki and Lothar Smith as PhD endeavours, and Valentina Mazzucato as the overall research coordinator of the Ghana TransNet project, and Amsterdam researcher. Further input came from one MSc student, three other PhD supervisors and various research collaborators and assistants, both in Ghana and in the Netherlands.

During a five-year period 29 ego-centered networks were studied in depth. These were the networks of 29 Ghanaian migrants in the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam, which holds a major concentration of Ghanaian migrants, who had come to the Netherlands in large numbers in the 1990s and 2000s, and mainly settled in a relatively new complex with huge apartment blocks in the southeastern part of the Amsterdam metropolis. While these migrants communicated with hundreds of other people in their contemporary lives, we concentrated on major economic and social relationships that linked them back to either rural parts of the Ashanti Region, or to Accra, as an important urban economy in Ghana. Thus we found that their core networks together consisted of 131 people. The 29+131 people were studied for a considerable length of time via a network survey and one year of monthly transaction studies. In-depth interviews on eight key themes in their lives were also part of the research design as well. Finally informal conversations with informants, key experts and observation at various places and events, both in the Netherlands and in Ghana altogether helped the researchers to produce a dense pattern of information on transnational ties.

Ghanaians in Amsterdam

Ghanaians in Amsterdam are perceived to be hard-working, enterprising migrants, partly with a legalised status, partly illegally living and working in the Amsterdam metropolis. Many of them are active as domestic servants, but Ghanaian workers can be found in many parts of the urban economy. Ghanaians in Amsterdam suddenly became a well-known migrant group when an Israeli airplane hit one of the apartment blocks in Amsterdam-Bijlmermeer in September 1992, and when among the dead and wounded remarkably many were of Ghanaian descent. Ghanaians in Amsterdam also gained some recognition through their religious activities, as many belong to Pentecostal churches or took the initiative to start new ones. Amsterdam-Bijlmermeer is also home to very many Afro-American people who were born in Surinam, when that still was a Dutch colony in the Guyanas. Many of them trace their origin to Ghana, which used to be one of the recruitment areas for Dutch and other slave traders in the 17th and 18th Century. Particularly in the religious sphere many Ghanaian and Surinamese have formed networks. Scholarly attention for the

Ghanaians in Amsterdam already started in the 1990s, e.g. Daniel Arhinful's PhD study (Arhinful, 1999). But also government departments became interested in their lives; the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that the number of 'legal' Ghanaians in the Netherlands in the year 2000 was 15,610 (at least one third of them living in Amsterdam-Bijlmermeer) and 'a few thousands' illegal people (Choenni, 2002: 15). In 2005 the number of legally registered Ghanaians in Amsterdam had grown to more than 10,000, and they had become the fifth largest group of so-called non-western immigrants in the city (after the Surinamese, Turkish, Moroccan and those from the Netherlands Antilles; Amsterdam 2005: 2). However, more recently there are signs of some more out-migration than immigration among the Ghanaian community in Amsterdam.

Ghanaian migrants living in Amsterdam are mainly coming from the Ashanti area, only few from non-Ashanti southern areas in Ghana, and hardly anyone from the poor Northern dryland areas. Almost all have gone to school and many have reached quite high qualifications, although they hardly ever work at that level in jobs in the Netherlands. Complaints from within the Ghanaian community that it is difficult for them to use their diplomas, and that it is much easier to do so in Great Britain, result in a steady outflow of people from Amsterdam to London, and in a widening of the migrant network to include Great Britain as well. Amsterdam-based Ghanaians also have ties with their family and friends in the United States, Canada and Germany, where large numbers of Ghanaian migrants live as well. Although many Ghanaians living in Amsterdam trace their ancestral origins from the Ashanti heartland, and from the villages in the cocoa zone of the country, many have also lived in the Ghanaian cities. Kumasi, the 'capital city of Ashantiland' is an important city for them, but many also have ties to, and investments in the capital city of Ghana, Accra, in the South-eastern part of the country, quite far away from Ashantiland. Figure 1 shows the area where most of the Ghanaian migrants come from:



Figure 1: Map of Ghana highlighting the source area of most international migrants.

In our in-depth research among a small group of Ghanaians in Amsterdam it became clear that Ghanaians remit a considerable part of their income to Ghana; we estimated it to be 35% of total income. Out of that 33% was spent on business investments and support, 16% on housing, 21% on subsistence and health care expenditure, 11% on

educational support, 8% on funerals and ceremonies, 4% on the costs of ‘papers’ for family and friends who also would like to come, 1% on direct contributions to community development activities and 6% on other types of expenditure. Table 1 gives a summary of the types of expenditure most frequently mentioned.

Table 1: Types of expenditure of Ghanaian migrants living in Amsterdam

| The Netherlands | | | International |
|---|---|--|---|
| Neighbourhood | Municipality of Amsterdam | Other | |
| School fees Church/association donations Food shopping Liquor (for cultural ceremonies) Services (child care, call centers, <i>money transfers, travel agencies</i>) | Home purchase Rent Car purchase City tax | Dutch wax cloth Health insurance and health care Income tax <i>Lawyers</i> <i>Marriage partner</i> <i>Connection men</i> <i>Foreign police</i> <i>Dutch Embassy</i> | Phone calls Electronics Plane tickets Shipping <i>Connection men</i> <i>Detectives</i> |

Note: Types of expenditure in italic are costs related to the migration process

Supporting people ‘back home’

Our research design enabled a two-sided approach. Not only could we study the remittance practices of Ghanaians in Amsterdam, and the perceptions and behavioural motivations of these people, but also we could see how local people, both in the Ashanti villages and in larger towns, like Kumasi and Accra, mobilise support from ‘their’ migrants, and for what purposes (Mazzucato et al, 2004). It also becomes clear that the one-sided attention for remittances from host countries to home communities is only part of the picture, and often the data are very unreliable (Mazzucato et al., 2008), and expectations often unrealistic (Black, et al., 2003). Home communities also contribute socially, but also economically to the well-being of the migrants far away, which one of us called ‘reverse remittances’ (Mazzucato, 2009a). Particularly in the urban domain principles of reciprocity, trust and even the legitimacy of various forms of allegiance as based on identity versus practise were subject to constant negotiations in transnational ties between urbanites and foreign-based migrants (Smith, 2007). Here we will focus on the rural areas. To find information in the Ashanti villages we studied 26 Ashanti communities and among those 5 in-depth, with a once-per-week visit for a period of 15 months in a row. The large majority of the support was of a private character: supporting family to pay their bills, to support the studies of young family members, to build or expand a house (often through a caretaker), and to invest in agriculture or a business venture. But part of the support can be seen as public expenditure, both for community development purposes and for organising lavish funeral ceremonies. In this contribution we will particularly deal with these two elements of the overall support of Ghanaians in Amsterdam for their people back home.

Community development

Every village or small town tries to engage migrant support for so-called community development initiatives. This can be support for electrification, the improvement of a market place, basic health facilities, class rooms, a study fund for young and promising students, a school or municipal library, or support to community water facilities. Many Ghanaian migrant communities abroad have formed village or town-specific support groups and these often play some role in mobilising funds for 'development'. Many local communities have gradually developed institutionalised mechanisms to organise that support. Examples are the creation of a so-called development tax, to which also migrants are supposed to contribute. Important are development-related donations at funerals, so-called annual 'harvests', e.g. during Christmas, or Easter. Also contributions to a variety of traditional or newly-invented festivals are encouraged and often there are attempts to get funds for specific projects for home associations of migrants abroad.

Our study revealed that these initiatives were mainly successful in communities with a moderate size; not in the very small communities, but also not in the larger communities. Table 2 shows the condensed results (for more information, see Kabki 2007 and Kabki *et al.*, 2008). Migrant contributions to effective community development projects could mainly be seen in these in-between communities.

Table 2: Community development in Ashanti villages

| <i>Village size:</i> | <i>Very small</i> | <i>Moderate</i> | <i>Large</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| Much support received | 1 | 7 | 2 | 10 |
| Little support received | 6 | 1 | 9 | 16 |

Note: Very small = < 3000 inhabitants; few families with migrants; Moderate = 3000-7000 inhabitants; ca 100 families with migrants; Large = >7000 inhabitants; many families with migrants

In these in-between rural communities an important fund raising mechanism is the so-called annual 'harvest'. For example in an exemplary village: during the Easter Harvest in 2003 contributions by villagers were 150 \$, migrants contributed 400 \$, and the local government 300\$. In communities like these there appeared to be a crucial role of the local funeral culture. Sanctions to non-compliance of migrant contributions to community development projects are mainly being organised through funerals. Each funeral needs permission from a local community leader and a funeral ceremony can only be organised after paying arrears and fines. All this is remarkably well organised and institutionalised via the funeral donation card (also for migrants).

The connection between funerals and development projects in these communities is important, although often hidden at first sight. A family with arrears to contributions to the community development fund does not get a right to organise a funeral. When funerals are being organised and people generously donate to the bereaved family, 10% of all donations go to the community development fund. People who do not attend a funeral do have to pay a fine, and that also goes to the community development fund. And the other way around: the best providers to the community development fund in the past get the most prestigious funerals, which is both a sign of respect and a source of a large funeral 'harvest'. The cultural economy of the Ashanti clearly relates social prestige to economic wealth, and the other way around, and one

of the most important cultural institutions, the funeral, is a clear sign of that connection.

However, success depends on village leadership. What is needed is a well-respected leader and initiator of certain development initiatives. What is needed is trust in local leaders and transparency. There should be an enforcement organisation, and the role of the local leader is crucial. And the leader's role also is to manage conflicts. One of the most important characteristics in a local leader is persistence or perseverance. And networking abilities become ever more important. The current mass use of the cell phone is changing the importance of and scope for managing long-distance relationships. Path dependency is important (and hence: to understand successes and failures a researcher often has to go back quite far in local history). And: scale matters a lot. In larger communities the scale is often too big for personal relationships of trust-maintenance. There are also many more commercial alternatives for what in smaller communities are community development facilities. The 'easy', more straightforward targets for community development (such as electrification, roads and sanitation) have already been provided. The more difficult ones are often more corruption-prone, or need more professional organisation. And if things go wrong (and they easily do at that level of scale) local trust disappears and it is far more difficult to start all over again, or with a new initiative. In larger communities one can see other initiatives that are successful, while the ones at the municipality level fail. These successful initiatives seem to be more successful at lower levels of scale: within the church community, or at the level of the neighbourhood.

The importance of funerals for community development successes at the level of in-between villages has drastically changed in the last thirty years. Funerals in the Ashanti area of Ghana have become much more lavish. The migrant involvement has become crucial. Many funerals have really become transnational events. The migrants symbolically renew their 'belonging' and 'claims'. And for the villagers and for village leaders funerals are a means to 'keep migrants interested'. Funerals have become moments of intense communication, exchange and redistribution of resources. And much of it is informally organised and is 'beyond statistics'. The cultural economics of funerals has become a statistically hidden, but extremely important part of the economy as a whole. To know what is really happening research needs to be simultaneous and detailed, and it should combine transaction and network studies.

An example of a rurally based but transnationally performed funeral

In one of our studies, we presented a detailed economic analysis of these funeral economics (Mazzucato et al, 2006; Kabki et al. 2008). Here we will give a summary of the major findings of a funeral in one of the in-between villages that was a truly transnational affair, although the deceased woman had never been abroad. It happened in the year 2004.

Normally a funeral in the Ashanti area consists of five events. After death has occurred there is the so-called one-week ceremony. This is followed by the 40-day ceremony and the funeral itself, which lasts three full days. Then there is a meeting, which is called the 'closing of accounts'. And after one year there is the 'one year

celebration'. In this particular case at the funeral itself there were 1000 guests. Two of them were from Amsterdam, 100 from Accra, 200 from Kumasi, and the other 700 came from or from around the village. The total costs of all funeral arrangements and ceremonies were in the range of 10,000\$. In table 3 we give a breakdown of all costs:

Table 3: Distribution of costs of the transnational funeral (2004)

| <i>Activity/item</i> | <i>Costs (US\$)</i> |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Transport | 2400 |
| Communication | 800 |
| Hospitality | 2700 |
| Cultural services | 700 |
| Burial costs | 900 |
| Construction costs | 1400 |
| Clothing | 800 |

It is obvious that local villagers in Ghana, or even more affluent urbanites from Accra or Kumasi burying their next of kin in their villages of birth cannot pay such amounts and hence much depends on the willingness of migrant family and friends to contribute. Migrants from Amsterdam contributed 68% of all money that was spent during the funeral ceremonies in our case study, while the family in Ghana itself only contributed 9% of all costs. The remainder, 23% came from funeral guests, through the customary funeral contributions. And part of that goes to a community fund. On average it meant that a funeral guest contributed the equivalent of between two and three dollars. If we look at the economic geography of all direct expenditure, we can conclude that 20% stayed in Amsterdam (mainly payments for transport by air), businesses in Accra received 40%, those in and around Kumasi 20%, while 20% was spent in the village itself.

Conclusion

All over the world international migrants live transnational lives. They both contribute to the economies of their destination or host countries, but they often also contribute to the economy of their home areas/countries. The cultural economies of these relationships, and their impact on the regional economies, are not well known. Studies to find out how things really are, are notoriously difficult and demand a design that is multi-sited and network-oriented, and ideally also take on a longitudinal approach to capture changing dynamics in the transnational field. This also asks for researchers who dare to go beyond the 'hard-core economics' of studies on transnational flows, who are willing to contribute to a field that might best be called cultural economics, a domain of studies where institutional economics meets cultural anthropology and cultural and economic geography. In our contribution we highlighted two themes on which we conducted research: the role of migrant contributions to community development funds, and the role of migrant involvement in funerals. Thereby we have shown how these are intertwined, notably in rural regions, which points to the need for holistic studies of local (rural) development that not only take into consideration external influences on these so-called local developments, but also understands that these influences may well encompass various developmental 'sectors' and give

attention to the importance of geography, scale, and cultural institutions. And it shows the reality of rapid change.

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