# The Vatican of the Diaspora

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## 1. Introduction

"There should be double the number of churches", a pastor from Nigeria told me, "We just can't satisfy the demand here". The pastor was responding to my question, why there were so many new churches in my neighborhood. According to him, we can expect an increase in religious activities here, because "so many people are lonely and have no community here (…) and they look for support – they get material support elsewhere, but they come here because they also need spiritual support and hope". The number of such people is rising, he emphasized, and they are not by any means confined to immigrants. His own congregation, about 50 strong, consists of 'people from everywhere' – Africans as well as Europeans, from Antwerp but also from Brussels, France, The Netherlands. He was currently enlarging the one room (already a joined living room and garage) in which he held his services, because the congregation expanded continuously. Since he started his church in 2004, he had never seen such a rapid increase in interest.

The Nigerian pastor is one out of a good number of evangelical priests who have set up churches in my neighborhood. I shall describe my neighborhood in the next section; the arrival and continuous activity of evangelical churches is the single most remarkable change in the social space of my neighborhood over the last five-six years, an effect of superdiversity – the gradual shift into extreme cultural, linguistic and social diversity in Western societies that is an effect of globalization processes since the early 1990s.[1] I will show how an ethnographic use of linguistic landscaping can help to identify this phenomenon and guide us towards a clearer understanding of it. And for that purpose, I shall draw on an auto-ethnographic longitudinal object: my own superdiverse neighborhood.

The particular approach to linguistic landscaping I shall use here, is a technique designed to allow analytic insight in the presence and distribution of linguistically identified groups in an area, the practices they develop in that area, and the social dynamics behind such practices.[2] I use linguistic landscaping as a

[1] S. VERTOVEC: 'Superdiversity and its implications', in *Ethnic and racial studies* 30/6 (2007) 1024-1054; IDEM: 'Towards post-multiculturalism? Changing communities, contexts and conditions of diversity', in *International social science journal* 199 (2010) 83-95.

[2] J. BLOMMAERT & A. HUANG: 'Historical bodies and historical space', in *Journal of applied linguistics* 6/3 (2009) 11-26; IDEM: *Semiotic and spatial scope: towards a materialist semiotics* (= Working papers in urban languages and linguistics 62) (London/Gent/Albany/Tilburg 2010); M. BARNI: 'Mapping immigrant languages in Italy', in M. BARNI & G. EXTRA (eds.): *Mapping linguistic diversity in multicultural contexts* (Berlin 2008) 217-244;

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first-level decoding instrument in ethnographic fieldwork, a relatively fast and user-friendly tool to delve into the socio-cultural structure of an area by attending to the languages displayed in this area. The highly volatile and dynamic nature of socio-cultural configurations of space, as an effect of what the globalization processes we call superdiversity, creates a need for such forms of analytic immediacy.[3] An ethnographic approach to linguistic landscaping enables this.

## 2. The site: Oud-Berchem

Just over fifteen years ago, I moved with my family into Oud-Berchem, an inner-city neighborhood in the South-Eastern part of Antwerp. By Belgian standards, Antwerp is a big city with about half a million inhabitants. The Antwerp harbor is one of the world's largest ones, and trucks to and from the harbor congest the ring road around Antwerp, which is one of Europe's busiest highways. This economic preponderance does not mean that Antwerp is a prosperous city. The average income in Antwerp is lower than the Flemish one, and much lower than that of some of Antwerp's suburbs. Antwerp has always counted a very large working class population employed in the harbor and adjacent industries, trade and commerce. It has consequently always counted large working class neighborhoods, and Oud-Berchem is one of those. From a rather village-like peripheral district of Antwerp in the early 20th century, it developed into a densely populated popular neighborhood after the second world war, consisting of, mainly, lower-qualified laborers, clustering in the neighborhood surrounding the commercial axis of Statiestraat-Driekoningenstraat. These two joined streets, together about 1,2 kilometer long, connect the large railroad station (hence 'Statiestraat', 'Station Street') and still form the center of Oud-Berchem.

From the 1970s onwards, the neighborhood became the home for a large community of labor immigrants, mainly from Turkish origins. Until today, the Statiestraat-Driekoningenstraat area is known and perceived as the Turkish neighborhood of Antwerp. The Turkish immigrants bought property from the by then ageing Flemish working class. The latter moved to the more remote districts of Antwerp, where larger houses with gardens could be purchased. The Turkish immigrants were followed, from the early to mid 1990s on, by successive waves of immigrants from all over the world, often entering the country

M. BARNI & C. BAGNA: 'A mapping technique and the linguistic landscape', in E. SHOHAMY & D. GORTER (eds.): *Linguistic landscape: expanding the scenery* (London 2008) 126-140; K. JUFFERMANS: *Local languaging: literacy products and practices in Gambian society* (= PHD Dissertation Tilburg University 2010).

[3] J. BLOMMAERT & B. RAMPTON: 'Language and superdiversity: a position paper', in *Working papers* 70; J. BLOMMAERT: *The sociolinguistics of globalization* (Cambridge 2010). For the ethnographic framework, see J. BLOMMAERT & J. DONG: *Ethnographic fieldwork: a beginner's guide* (Bristol 2010).

through the asylum procedure, and also quite often through clandestine and temporary immigration routes. Oud-Berchem is currently one of the Antwerp districts with the highest concentration of non-European immigrants, with a notable concentration of asylum seekers. The central axis of the neighborhood, the Statiestraat-Driekoningenstraat, reflects this. Immigrants from all corners of the earth have opened shops, hair salons, cafés and restaurants there, visibly underscoring the superdiverse character of the neighborhood. At the same time, Oud-Berchem has a higher than average unemployment rate, especially among younger immigrant men, and the average income is lower than the Antwerp average as well. This, too, is visible in the Statiestraat-Driekoningenstraat. The number of vacant commercial premises is high at any time, investments in improving the existing shops are low, and older local Flemish people would often lament the disappearance of Flemish-owned commercial enterprise from the street (often called 'the good shops', in contradistinction with the foreign-operated groceries, hair salons, superettes, night shops and internet shops).[4]

In terms of mobility and accessibility, Oud-Berchem offers several important assets. As mentioned, a major commuter railway station offers connections to almost every part of Belgium as well as to The Netherlands. A direct train ride to Brussels takes less than half an hour. The Antwerp ring road connects to major highways to the North (Breda and from there Rotterdam, Utrecht, Amsterdam and the German Ruhrgebiet); South (Brussels, and from there on to the Ardennes, Luxemburg, France and from there to Southern Europe); East (Hasselt, Liège, Eindhoven and from there to Cologne and Düsseldorf); and West (the North Sea coast, Paris, Calais and from there to the UK). It is one of Europe's major switchboards for overland traffic. Oud-Berchem is based along the single busiest part of the Antwerp Ring Road, with exits and entrances within minutes' reach from the Statiestraat-Driekoningenstraat. Trams and bus services connect the neighborhood to most other parts of the city. Due to these mobility opportunities, the neighborhood has recently started to attract young, native double-income families, often highly qualified and politically left-of-center. This *bohémien* segment of the population has created a demand for cultural hubs, satisfied by a couple of local cafés who now present live music, literary and political events; by a celebrity chef who runs a very successful restaurant in the Driekoningenstraat, and by a cultural center that stages avant-garde theater and dance.

[4] This information was gathered over the past number of years through a variety of formal and informal sources, ranging from annual reports issued by the Antwerp City Council and the Berchem District to talks and discussions attended in the context of neighborhood committee work and local activism. In addition, regular, what I could call 'organic' contacts with inhabitants over a long period of time provided a sense of the 'subjective' aspects of neighborhood life.

## 3. Worshipping in sixteen places

On 5 May 2011 I counted sixteen places of worship in my neighborhood. I am mentioning the date for a reason: the patterns of presence and visibility of the places of worship change rapidly and continuously; hence the present number is different from past and future ones. The Statiestraat, as we know, used to be a flourishing commercial center; over the past decade, however, numerous small businesses and shops have terminated their activities. The neighborhood counts a large number of vacant commercial premises available at relatively modest prices.[5] New churches, consequently, rent former shops on a short-term basis, then move to another (larger) one, before they take a more permanent lease and begin to rebuild the premises. We shall see examples of this itinerary below.

The sixteen places of worship are divided as follows:
- 2 Catholic churches
- 3 mosques (1 Turkish, 1 Moroccan, 1 international)
- 11 Evangelical churches
    - 1 local
    - 5 African
    - 3 Brazilian
    - 2 Latin-American

The Catholic churches are evidently the oldest ones in the neighborhood. The St Wilibrord Church is a listed monument; its oldest parts were built in the 15th century. The St Hubertus Church (the largest building in the neighborhood, located in the heart of the Statiestraat-Driekoningenstraat area) was built in the early 20th century. Both churches used to serve large congregations of parishioners until a couple of decades ago. Currently, the picturesque St Willibrord Church remains a frequently used venue for weddings, funerals, Holy Communions and other religious events. The two churches, however, had to be amalgamated into one parish and together they offer three weekly services to a sharply reduced and changed congregation. The Sunday service at St Hubertus currently attracts some 30 faithful, a large majority of which are Philippine families with their children, and single Polish men. The weekly services are still held in Dutch; in other parishes in Antwerp, services are now held in French, English, Polish and Russian due to the overwhelming numerical dominance of immigrant faithful from Central Africa, the Philippines, Poland and Byelorussia. Chronologically, the three mosques are second in line. The Turkish Kuba mosque is by far the largest due to the preponderance of Turkish immigrants in the neighborhood. The mosque owns a large complex of buildings in a side-street

[5] A phone call to some real estate agents taught me that vacant commercial premises in this area can be rented at € 400-600,- a month on average.

of the Statiestraat, and organizes Saturday Quran classes as well as some special religious and cultural events along with the regular religious services. The Moroccan El Mouhsinine mosque in a side-street of the Driekoningenstraat is far smaller and a few years younger than the Turkish one. Both mosques attract their faithful almost exclusively from the neighborhood, they are strictly local places of worship. The newest mosque in the neighborhood is the Al Zahra mosque, also located in a side-street of Driekoningenstraat. This small Shiite mosque attracts an international audience and is not affiliated to either the Turkish or the Moroccan Muslim networks in the Antwerp area. Extreme-right and Zionist sources allege that the mosque is a center of Hezbollah activity in Antwerp. Note that these three mosques are the only ones in the whole district of Berchem. This neighborhood is the center for Muslim religious activity in the wider area. All three mosques are housed in ordinary houses, sometimes extended and rebuilt, but hardly noticeable for the uninterested passer-by.

The local Evangelical church in a side-street of Driekoningenstraat was started by a Canadian couple in 1972 and has grown into a flourishing congregation of mostly local members. The international ones, by contrast are a phenomenon of the past decade, a superdiversity phenomenon. All these churches are housed in former commercial premises – they are 'shop window churches' of varying size. The smallest among them have a safety license for 49 people; the larger ones for 99; and one church is currently expanding its building so as to host several hundreds of worshippers. Note that all of them comply with city and district regulations on public buildings – they do attend to the paperwork for building, safety and hygiene.

The new Evangelical churches have their origins in Africa (5 churches, notably from Ghana and Nigeria), Brazil (3 churches) and Latin-America (2 churches). One of the Brazilian churches sublets its facilities to two African churches; another Nigerian church uses the premises of a Latin-American church.

We shall turn to the new churches in some detail below. But before that, let us draw attention to one general point about the landscape of religious places in this neighborhood.

## 4. Visibility and invisibility

We know that the Catholic churches in the neighborhood are very visible: they define the neighborhood and even give their names to streets, squares and communities. Yet, these highly visible places of worship have lost their stable, large local constituencies and now draw on a small immigrant and fluid community of faithful. The Catholic churches, one could say, are empty, they are not really in business. The successful ones, by contrast, are all but invisible. The mosques are only known to members of their religious communities and to a

small number of non-Muslim local inhabitants. Consider a picture of the El Mouhsinine mosque [illustration 1].

Illustration 1: El Mouhsinine Mosque. [Photo: Jan Blommaert]

The mosque is a small house in a row, quite ordinary in outlook and only identified as a mosque by two small inscriptions in Arabic. It is painted in Ochre yellow rather than in the emblematic green of Islam. The doors of the building are only opened when there is a service; when closed, the house looks like any other in the neighborhood.

The same invisibility applies to the new evangelical churches, though we see a pattern of development there. In a first stage of implantation, the churches are hardly identifiable as such [illustration 2]. We see the front of a building that was until recently a lingerie shop. To the shop window, an A4 poster is stuck [illustration 3]. Unless one reads that poster, one would not identify this place as a Brazilian church.

Illustration 2 & 3: Former Lingerie Pascetti, now Ministerio Resgate. [Photo: Jan Blommaert]

Finding out about the sharing of space between different churches also demands attention to small details. The front of a Brazilian church is clearly identified by red lettering. A small A4 poster on the window presents one of the two Ghanese churches located at the same address [illustration 4].

Illustration 4: Space sharing. [Photo: Jan Blommaert]

Little outward fuss is made by the churches, at least not in the early stages of their presence. They just appear to blend into the landscape, often not bothering about removing or covering the previous owner's shop signs. When they have established themselves, however, they do become more visibly present and identifiable as churches. The Brazilian church that originally used the former Lingerie Pascetti recently acquired and renovated another building [illustration 5].

Illustration 5: Ministerio Resgate's new premises. [Photo: Jan Blommaert]

And the largest and most successful church in the neighborhood appears to have no difficulties with being identified as such. The Nigeria-based church attracts a large constituency of several hundreds of followers from a wide area, including from France and The Netherlands, and recently successfully applied for a building permit to expand the former superette in which it is housed [illustration 6].

Some of the churches (especially the African ones) occasionally organize larger events in Antwerp hotels, led by senior preachers who travel around the network of churches. And the regular presence of large numbers of worshippers from Africa and Latin-America has spawned a number of exotic food shops (often announcing 'African, Asian and European' commodities), because the faithful combine shopping with the long hours of religious practice during weekend days. Even if the presence of churches has not dramatically altered the

looks of the neighborhood, it has affected the neighborhood's landscape quite profoundly.

Illustration 6: Redeemed Christian Church of God. [Photo: Jan Blommaert]

## 5. Fully globalized churches

The church in illustration 6 is a Pentecostal-Charismatic church. Meyer (2006) provides the following characterization of these churches, drawing on observations from Ghana:

> Many Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, the latest brand of Pentecostalism that started to thrive in Ghana since the early 1990s, are run in a business-like fashion by flamboyant pastors. Making skilful use of the modern mass media that became deregulated and commercialized in the course of Ghana's turn to a democratic constitution, Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches have become omnipresent in the public sphere (…). Similar to American televangelism, many of them have adopted mass media so as to produce and broadcast spectacular church services to a mass audience. Recorded during church conventions yet edited carefully so as to ensure utmost credibility (…), such programs claim to offer eye witness accounts of the power of God to perform miracles via the charismatic pastor and his prayer force.

> Featured as an embodiment – indeed an 'objectification' – of divine power, the pastor conveys a sense of amazement and wonder.[6]

The use of mass media (and increasingly social media) by this type of Evangelical churches is well documented. Churches offer fictionalized accounts of God's power by means of broadcasted *telenovelas*, sold on videocassettes or CD-roms to faithful all over the world, along with copies of the Scripture, books of prayer and song, and collected sermons from leading pastors.[7] Increasingly, Facebook groups emerge as nodes of organization for these religious communities, and social media are now fully incorporated into the media complex used by these churches.

Services in these churches take several hours and are distinctly multimodal and multimedial. There is live music, singing and dancing, and sermons and prayers broadcasted over the internet from faraway places are incorporated into the local services. One Latin-American church is affiliated to Bethel TV, a religious television channel operated from Lima, Peru; the Nigerian church [illustration 6] has a bookstore selling books printed in Nigeria; and the Latin-American churches all identify themselves as belonging to a worldwide missionary movement. The churches are connected to networks of like-minded churches, both regionally and internationally, in one large complex of globalized late-modern evangelism, and the traveling 'stars' of these churches preach all over the world. The charisma of such religious movements is 'portable', in Meyer's terms: 'Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on a 'mobile self' and a 'portable charismatic identity', is a religion that speaks to experiences of dislocation, fragmentation and increasing mobility'.[8]

The appearance of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in a superdiverse neighborhood such as this one can, thus, be related to members' experiences of superdiversity – isolation, the lack of networks and communities, the need for support from such networks and communities. I will return to this topic below. The services are also all distinctly 'spectacular' in Meyer's terminology. The presence of the Holy Spirit is invoked and allegedly experienced by participants:

> Pentecostal services are powerful sensational forms that seek to involve believers in such a way that they sense the presence of God in a seemingly *immediate* manner,

[6] B. MEYER: *Religious sensations: why media, aesthetics, and power matter in the study of contemporary religion* (= Inaugural lecture, Free University of Amsterdam, 2006) 12. See also R. MARSHALL-FRATANI: 'Mediating the global and the local in Nigerian Pentecostalism', in *Journal of religion in Africa* 28/3 (1998) 278-315, p. 283.

[7] For examples from Congo, see K. PYPE: '"We need to open up the country": development and the Christian key scenario in the social space of Kinshasa's teleserials', in *Journal of African media studies* 1/1 (2009) 101-116; for Nigeria, see MARSHALL-FRATANI: 'Mediating the global and the local in Nigerian Pentecostalism'.

[8] MEYER: *Religious sensations* 29; M. MASKENS: 'Migration et Pentecôtisme à Bruxelles', in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 143 (2008) 49-68.

> and are amazed by His power. Still the Holy Spirit does not arrive out of the blue. I have witnessed many such services, in which the pastor and congregation pray for the Holy Spirit to come. After some time, the prayers become louder and louder, and many start speaking in tongues. This is taken as a sign that the Holy Spirit is manifest. At a certain moment the pastor indicates the end of the prayer session, and calls upon the Holy Spirit to heal the sick, protect the vulnerable, and expel demonic spirits.[9]

People can bring a wide variety of problems to the services. This is the list provided by one of the Brazilian churches: addiction, depression, unemployment, immigration, nervousness, family, envy, hearing voices, diseases, seeing ghosts, fear, sleeplessness, death wish, voodoo, Satanism. Whoever suffers from this interesting range of afflictions can call upon the congregation for prayer, redemption and healing. Personal testimony is very much part of the proceedings, as is speaking in tongues. And when the services are over, food and beverages are offered, and people stay in the hall for a long time after the end of the service proper. Apart from the problems listed above, people can also find a cure for loneliness and isolation in the churches.

While the churches have their roots in specific parts of the world, and would still draw most of their followers from *emigrés* from the same parts, they identify themselves explicitly as ecumenical, and do so by means of the choice of language in communicating with the public. That the primary audience would be people from the church's area of origin can be judged from illustration 7, a notice stuck on the church's door of a Latin-American church informing followers that the leadership will be absent.

Illustration 7: Spanish notice in a Latin-American church. [Photo: Jan Blommaert]

[9] MEYER: *Religious sensations* 11-12.

The notice is in Spanish only – the imagined audience for such messages is consequently Spanish-speaking. Note in passing the globalization aspect of the notice: the local leaders have gone to a meeting of the European branches of their church in Brussels.

The same church, however, identifies itself in Spanish and Dutch and welcomes Dutch-speaking potential followers [illustration 8].

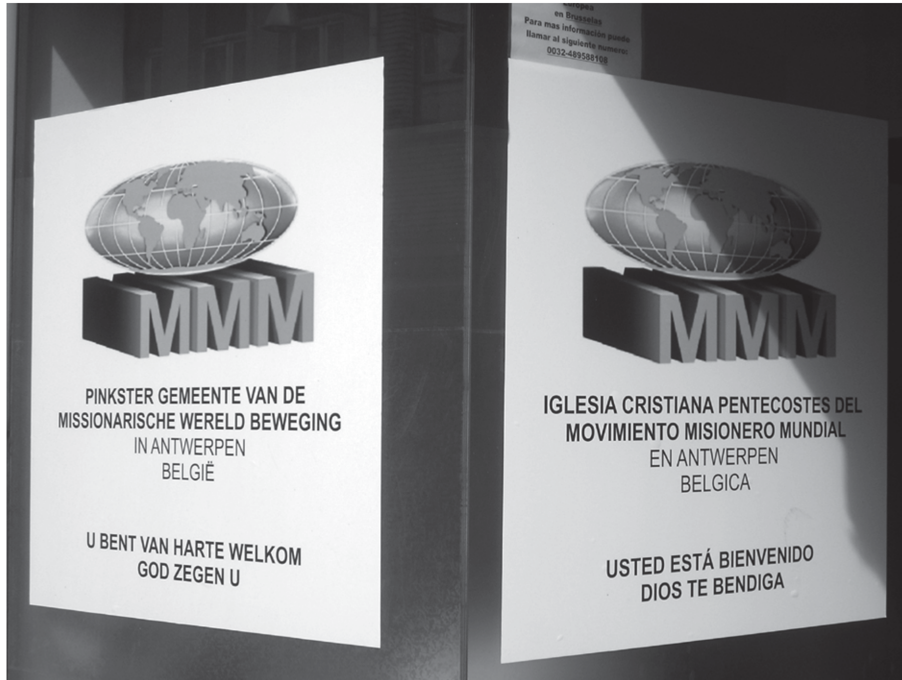


Illustration 8: Bilingual announcements on a Latin-American church. [Photo: Jan Blommaert]

Such ecumenism is no doubt characteristic of missionary movements (and recall that these churches explicitly self-identify as 'missionary' churches). But the emergent and often problematic character of such multilingual communication patterns shows that this ecumenism probably represents a stage in a gradual process of implantation and solidification, in which churches initially start small and modestly, inviting primarily people with whom they share national or regional backgrounds. The inconspicuous accommodation of newly arrived churches would corroborate this. Once these faithful have been recruited, the churches discover that there may be a broader 'market', and they start using Dutch, the language that has most currency in that area (even as a trans-cultural vernacular).

That this is an *ad-hoc*, local adaptation to circumstances rather than the work of well-oiled global religious businesses can be observed from the frequent struggles with written Dutch observable in public notices. Illustration 9 shows

us the poster on which a Brazilian church describes the (earlier quoted) range of problems that can be addressed during services, along with the hours of the weekly services. The notice is in Brazilian Portuguese (right) and a highly unstable form of Dutch (left).

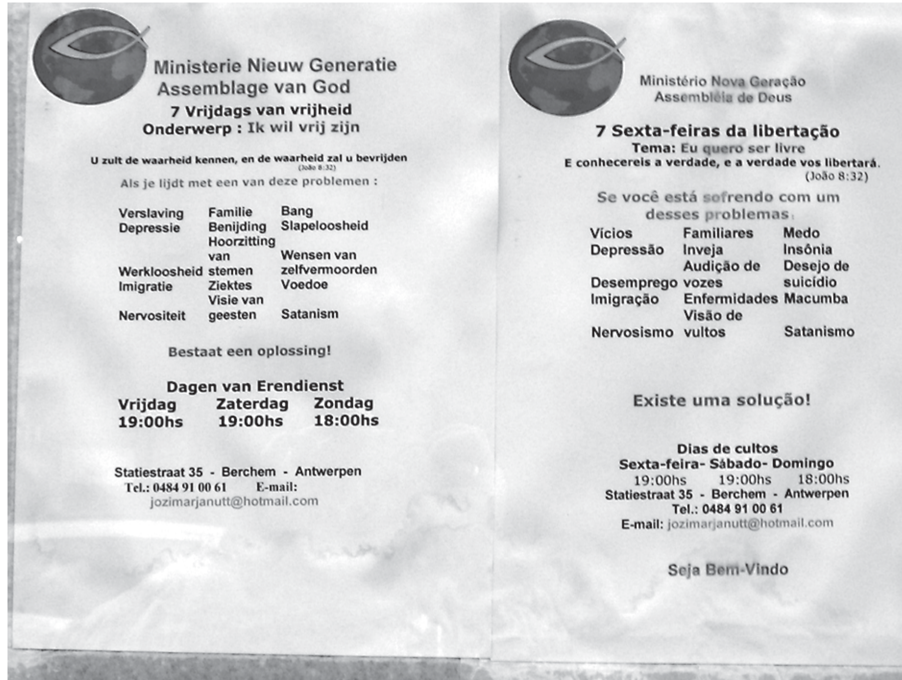


Illustration 9: Dutch-Portuguese bilingualism in a Brazilian church. [Photo: Jan Blommaert]

The 'Assembly of God' becomes *God's Assemblage* in Dutch; 'hearing' in 'hearing voices' is converted into *hoorziting*, the word used for forensic and legal 'hearings' (as in immigration cases); and so forth. The Dutch in illustration 9 is emergent, profoundly non-native Dutch, pointing to an absence of available resources for producing 'correct' Dutch in the church community. Concretely: when the church leadership designed this notice, they had no people fluent in Dutch literacy in their community yet. The poster was drawn **before** Dutch-speaking followers joined the congregation.

We can now begin to see a pattern of socio-cultural presence in the neighborhood, organized around religious socio-cultural practices. The churches moved into the neighborhood quickly and re-shaped the neighborhood quite importantly in no time. In the first stage of their presence, the churches operated below the radar, using hardly noticeable spaces for organizing their activities, and targeting audiences that have their roots in a globalized regional background shared with the churches: Nigerian churches would target West-African

worshippers; Brazilian ones would target Brazilians, and so forth.[10] The churches thus shape a node in a fully globalized network of religious institutions – Berchem becomes the node – and the globalized nature of the churches turns them into organizational centers for the diaspora. Diaspora groups coalesce around the churches. Missionary activity in this stage is understood as bringing together the diasporic flock of churches from the 'homeland'. In a second stage, however, we see that the churches widen their scope of recruitment and adopt a more outward-directed strategy. Premises become more visible and conspicuous, and ecumenical languages such as Dutch now appear alongside the languages of the 'homeland', inviting worshippers that do not belong to the diasporic 'core', so to speak. Missionary activity now becomes ecumenical, and we can observe this development both in the change of the physical spaces occupied by the churches and by the changing forms of multilingual practices they deploy. The churches now begin to organize not just the diasporic groups, but new globalized communities wider than just the diasporic ones.

## 6. The functions of churches

The Pentecostal churches we have seen appear in this neighborhood have links to countries that are often seen as robustly Roman-Catholic such as Brazil and Peru. In a study of Congolese Pentecostal churches in Brussels, Maskens observes that Pentecostal churches in such countries have urban origins, and that in countries such as those, their initial constituencies are made up of rural internal migrants.[11] (Observe that Congo as well would fit the list of staunchly Roman-Catholic countries). In that sense, the churches are Diaspora (or missionary) churches even in their countries of origin. Maskens points out that the fact of migration with its effects of dislocation, detachment from older local forms of social and cultural organization, the loss of an organic community and so forth is a powerful moment of conversion.[12] She also notes what we have observed as well: that churches are often almost invisible (at least for some time). She offers two explanations for this.[13] One: many of the followers of these churches are undocumented and therefore clandestine immigrants; and two: the churches are suspicious of the outside world, notably the Belgian State,

[10] The national or regional background of target groups is a function of the languages used by churches. The use of English enables Nigerian churches to draw in a community of followers not restricted to one country; the same goes for the use of Spanish in Latin-American churches. Portuguese restricts the target audience of Brazilian churches largely to Brazilian immigrants; hence the emergence of Dutch as a language that allows recruiting a larger constituency.

[11] MASKENS: 'Migration et Pentecôtisme à Bruxelles' 49.

[12] MASKENS: 'Migration et Pentecôtisme à Bruxelles' 49.

[13] MASKENS: 'Migration et Pentecôtisme à Bruxelles' 50-51.

because of the hostile climate towards 'cults' and 'sects' that was the outcome of a Belgian Parliamentary Commission inventorying, exploring and sanctioning the activities of cults in the late 1990s. Churches that offer healing sessions are quickly perceived as cults, and such churches, consequently, 'keep their noses clean' in relation to the State.

I opened this paper with statements from a Nigerian pastor, leader of one of the churches in the neighborhood, who pointed towards the tremendous 'market' for churches in the area. While I interviewed him, building in his church was in progress, because the 50 or so seats he could offer to worshippers no longer sufficed to welcome the growing numbers of new converts. When asked whether his followers were from West-Africa mainly, he emphasized the ecumenical nature of his church.[14] And as we have seen, he located the 'market' for churches such as his own in the vacant space left by the State and the local communities: people were isolated, feared they would lose God in their lives (or feared to be abandoned by God because of the life they were leading), had a need for a community of 'brothers' and 'sisters' and so forth. If we want to understand the functions of these churches, we need to consider the realities of diasporic life in an area such as this one.

In earlier research performed in Brussels, we came across Pentecostal churches as well,[15] and we saw that churches such as these ones display and organize a broad range of services and forms of assistance to their followers. In fact, we concluded that such churches play a crucial role as a first-line system of informal solidarity for people whose reliance on and access to formal (state-organized) systems of solidarity was severely limited. Clandestine migrants are not eligible for welfare benefits, have no access to formal systems of social housing allocation nor to the formal labor market, and very often have restricted access to health provision, education and training programs. The church was a vital instrument for gaining access to informally allocated resources for people living in such extremely vulnerable conditions, and churches were very successful because of their low threshold of accessibility. One Congolese informant in Brussels remarked, tongue in cheek, that 'the only thing you need to do is to say that you believe in Christ' and one would gain access to a community in which one is, by definition, welcome (this point is also made by Maskens).

In churches such as the ones described here, newcomers find a warm community, a 'family' in the words of the Nigerian pastor, of 'brothers and sisters' united by their faith in Christ. People smile when newcomers enter the group, they enquire about identity, backgrounds and living conditions, and try to help

[14] In fact, when I made pictures of the house in which the church was located, a Belgian young man approached me to find the nature of my interest. He brought me to the Nigerian pastor.

[15] K. BEYENS, J. BLOMMAERT, A. DEWILDE, S. HILLEWAERT, H. MEERT, K. STUYCK & K. VERFAILLE: *Grenzen aan de solidariteit* (Gent 2005).

and assist wherever they can. Thus, members of such church communities can get access to cheap housing, child care, inexpensive cars and furniture, and sometimes also jobs or financial loans – all of this on the basis of informal mechanisms of solidarity that ensue from membership of the church community. For people who have no access to regular mechanisms of material support allocation, churches offer unique resources. Thus, the churches are not just communities of faith, but also communities of knowledge: the knowledge to survive in a hostile context, the knowledge to 'integrate' in the margins of a society such as that of contemporary Western Europe.

The ecumenism of these churches thus, could reflect not just the increased success of Pentecostal religious practice among non-diasporic groups, but also the increased vulnerability of non-diasporic groups as well. Clandestine immigrants are in the forefront of such processes of marginalization,[16] but such processes are obviously no longer restricted to immigrants and affect a growing body of 'native' people as well. Churches appear to have discovered this 'market', and their language practices show that they now actively recruit such new constituencies into their communities.

## 7. The Vatican

In that way and through these mechanisms, the churches in Oud-Berchem must be seen as an emergent (and quickly consolidating) system of institutionalization and organization of solidarity among a rapidly expanding social formation of people who lack access to more rigorously structured systems of solidarity. The neo-liberalization of welfare and social provisions in countries such as Belgium (a process that has accelerated significantly over the past decade) has made access to services and resources increasingly competitive and selective. In order to gain access to welfare benefits, for instance, one needs an official residential address; in order to acquire that, one needs to have one's 'papers in order' and satisfy a broad, expanding and often contradictory set of criteria issued by public as well as private actors in the field of social welfare. This increasing selectivity has as an obvious effect that more and more people drop out of the systems of welfare and social service allocation, and require access to informal and low-threshold systems of allocation. Churches are highly successful players in this emerging field.

The fact that such churches cluster in a neighborhood such as Oud-Berchem is, consequently, probably not coincidental. As mentioned above, Oud-Berchem is both in reality and in the perception of people a poor immigrant neighborhood, populated by rapidly changing groups of short-term immigrant residents as well as by more constant residential migrant and 'native' communities. Such a neighborhood offers an infrastructure that can only be acquired in

[16] MASKENS: 'Migration et Pentecôtisme à Bruxelles' 53-54.

areas such as these: large numbers of cheaply available space – the former shops – and a first-line community of vulnerable people who can be potential 'customers' for religious business. People from the neighborhood flock towards such businesses, and they are joined by people from further afield, turning the neighborhood into a Vatican-like center of religious activity and its material and social spin-offs: access to a warm and welcoming community (a 'family'), to networks of mutual support and to material resources not obtainable elsewhere.

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