ECAS 2013 Lisbon
Panel 171
Multipolar religious production: old and new trends
Dr. Amber Gemmeke

DRAFT – Please do not cite

Interaction between West African Spiritual Healers and Black Caribbeans in the Netherlands

Introduction

Sabu, a Gambian 'medium', as he calls himself, living in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, said:

> 'Dutch people do not believe in this, they do not even like it. I also do not have many African clients. African people call home to Senegal or Gambia to get a treatment or advice, where they already know who to contact and where costs of treatment are cheaper as well. Most of my clients come from Suriname and from the Antilles. They believe strongly in what we do, and of course they know about it since their forefathers brought the knowledge from Ghana. The Surinamese, they love to do baths, and I always make sure I have herbs from Gambia to give them baths.'
> (interview 30 January 2013)

Focusing on the interaction between West Africans and Black Carribeans (Surinamese and Antilleans) in the Netherlands concerning magical – religious practices such as divination, spells, spiritual protection and empowering, this paper addresses the circular movement of spiritual knowledge between West Africa, Northern Europe, and the Caribbean. West African and Black Caribbean spiritual healers and clients meet in a Northern European country where their spiritual knowledge is unknown and unappreciated by the general Dutch public. The paper is based on ongoing research among West African spiritual healers in the Netherlands and previous research in Senegal. I visited, in 2012 and 2013, a total of ten African healers in Delft, Leiden, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam. West African spiritual healers in

the Netherlands cater mainly to Black Caribbeans - like elsewhere in Europe (see Babou 2011) and, to a lesser extent, to Africans, Moroccans, Latin Americans, and Turks. West Africans and Black Caribbeans exchange knowledge on magical – religious practices and visit each other's' spiritual experts. This is a rather recent development: while West Africans offer magical-religious services in former colonizers France and Great Britain since the beginning of the 20th century and as of the beginning of the 1990s also to Spain and Italy, they established themselves in the Netherlands since about the end of the 1990s. Although the largest group of West Africans in the Netherlands consist of Ghanaians, due to a shared colonial history, most West African spiritual healers originate from Islamic countries such as Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and Mali. They are concentrated in the migrant filled parts of urban areas such as Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and The Hague. Their services testify of a diversification of the spiritual market in European urban centers due to globalization and migration. Furthermore, a shared colonial history with Black Caribbeans offers new dimensions to the creative reinvention of magical – religious practices and knowledge among groups that, marginalized in Dutch society as a whole, share a geographical environment (migrant filled outskirts of urban centers), knowledge on the use of magical –religious practices and herbal medicine to cope with daily struggles, and a reference point of West Africa as a source of ancestral spiritual power. In this way a 'transnational religious network' (Saraiva 2008). As Sabu, the Gambian healer quoted at the beginning of this paper indicated, meetings between West Africans and Black Caribbeans do not limit itself to locations in the Netherlands, but extend, by telephone calls and the ordering of herbs and other products, to West Africa. This paper will open with the portrayal of West African spiritual healers and their clients in the Netherlands, followed by a focus on the interaction between West Africans and Black Caribbeans, within and outside the domain of magical – religious practices.

West African Healers in the Netherlands

Within the Dutch landscape of alternative and spiritual healing, West African healers occupy a rather marginal place, both in terms of popularity with the Dutch population and in terms of numbers. An estimation of their numbers is highly approximative, as

they are not registered as a profession by tax institutes1, quite a number reside illegally in the Netherlands, and they are highly mobile; moving houses both within the Netherlands and internationally, as well as visiting clients inside and outside the Netherlands on shorter or longer periods, amounting up to months. One Guinean healer, for example, whom I called for the first time in November 2012, was over the following months in Paris for two months, back in Rotterdam for a month but after problems with his landlord again in Paris for a month. In April 2013, he was back in Rotterdam, staying with a friend, and trying to find another room. Based upon Hoffer's publications (2000, 2004) and my research, I estimate that at this moment a few hundred West African healers are (intermittently) active in the Netherlands. The marginality of African healers in the Netherlands is in sharp contrast with nearby Paris and Brussels, where their numbers are said to be much higher, running in the thousands (Kuczynski 2002).

In West Africa, spiritual healers are omnipresent. Often called marabout in Francophone areas, they offer services in a Sufi Islamic context and frame and phrase their services as such. Like in Dutch media, the efficacy and moral correctness of their services are hotly debated in West Africa as well, fuelled by a widespread fear of marabouts corrupted by materialism, trading piety for greed. Unlike in the Netherlands, however, they occupy a central place in society, their services being used at national and international levels of politics, economics and sports. In West Africa, the widespread presence of marabouts was recorded as early as the mid-17th century, when European travelers described their activities in the villages throughout the region (Dilley 2004: 34). Today, marabout families are highly respected and economically and politically powerful. A significant aspect of the political and economic power of marabouts is intimately tied to the mystical Sufi notion of *baraka*: divine grace and/ or blessing. *Baraka* is obtained through kinship, teachers, and exemplary behavior. It is associated with knowledge, a strong personality, wealth and power (see also Cruise O'Brien & Coulon 1988 and Soares 2005). It encompasses the capacity to give blessings that protect against a wide variety of misfortunes (Bop 2005: 1113). As Soares noted: "Through the exchange of gifts for blessings, prayers, and the employment of their knowledge of Islamic esoteric sciences, marabouts' spiritual capital is converted into additional economic and political power and

[1] As opposed to France, where researcher Kuzcinsky could start her research among African healers by looking at tax charts in 2003.

resources (2005: 748)". In the postcolonial period, the exchange of blessings and prayers for commodities intensified and proliferated. Through urbanization and liberalization of the press, marabouts became more and more 'free-floating sanctifiers' (Soares 2004: 153), aggressive entrepreneurs, avidly looking for clientele in West Africa's urban centers. Unconstrained by social control, urban centers – filled with rural migrants struggling in a highly competitive environment for jobs, spouses, accommodation - presented unparalleled opportunities to virtually anyone, including women and those without a marabout family, to offer spiritual empowering, protection and divination sessions to the needy (Gemmeke 2008). Since the 1980s, in line with general emigration patterns of West Africans to Europe, marabout families emigrated, seeking out new clients abroad. Whereas in the past labor force and resources of students of marabout families provided the income of marabout families, today resources mostly come from overseas family members and clients (*cf* Van Hoven 2003: 301).

In Europe, a further '*democratisation of baraka*' (Kuczynski 2002) takes place, in which the distortion of former social status and a lack of social control offers to anyone the opportunity to present himself as a 'medium' or 'spiritual healer', and collect himself a stock of knowledge to this end. Most West African healers in the Netherlands are young men between twenty and forty years old. Concerning their family background, migratory itineraries, educational level, occupational history, and the way in which they offer their spiritual services, however, they form a heterogeneous group. Some African 'healers' in the Netherlands are members of marabout families, having learned the practices of divination, amulet and potion making, spiritual protection and empowering as part of their Islamic education from their fathers, grandfathers, and uncles. Not all members of marabout families who emigrate to Europe continue their spiritual work, however. In fact, a number of them arrive on the invitation of clients in Europe, to subsequently overstay their visa and find work in other areas. A Dutch woman married to a Senegalese told me, for example, that of the four marabouts who stayed with them in Belgium, three overstayed their visa and moved on to live illegally in Europe. "The marabout who married us and whom my partner consulted a lot in the time he had no residence permit," she says, "came to live with us in Belgium until he moved on to Sweden where he is now married and stopped working as a marabout. My partner does not consult him anymore". Among those who received extended Islamic education, some

continue on a non-commercial bases to offer spiritual protection and empowering to friends, colleagues and acquaintances. A Senegalese man in his fifties, living in Delft, for example, travelled the world before settling in the Netherlands, where he worked in horticulture, as a cleaner, and has an import-export business. Having enjoyed a religious education in Tuba, the capital of the Murid Sufi brotherhood, he established a '*dahira*' or religious group in the Netherlands. He offers counseling, religious services at name givings, marriages, and funerals, as well as amulets, prayers, and potions. Another Senegalese man in his fifties, living in Rotterdam, is now full-time employed with offering spiritual services, after working for decades in security.

A large number of West African healers in the Netherlands, however, does not come from marabout families but decided, at some point of their stay in the Netherlands, to work as a 'healer'. They asked relatives when they are on holiday in Africa, or they learned from friends in the Netherlands how to offer spiritual services. This group, of whom a large number (though not all) stay illegally in the Netherlands, often see this work as one of the very few opportunities to earn money. "It is better than drugs dealing," a Guinean healer told me. Some among them are quite adventurous in spirit. I met, for example, a Ghanaian who, after running a bar, selling marihuana, and consulting on locations for petrol in Nigeria, now tried his luck with selling herbs and offering spiritual services, something he had learned on a holiday from a brother in Ghana. Another man, from Burundi, had smuggled diamonds and gold from Congo, worked as a healer in South Africa (where he was arrested and imprisoned, charged with murder through spiritual means) before he arrived illegally in the Netherlands, where he continues to work as a healer.

A number of African healers advertise their services on flyers, in local newspapers, and in magazines targeted at Surinamese and Antilleans, such as (until its recent discontinuation) *Pleasure*. One healer said, for example, that as soon as he needed some more money he would place an advertisement. Many meet their clients through personal contacts as well: neighbors, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. West African healers live and work among the people they cater to. All of them assert hardly ever being visited by Dutch-Dutch people, and if so, only those brought to them by non-Dutch friends or a non-Dutch partner. "I maybe see one or two Dutch people per year, brought to me by African or Surinamese friends of them. The Netherlands did not have any colonies in Africa, I think that is the reason. In Belgium

or France is a very different situation, there they believe. The moment a Dutch person comes to my door, I told my friends in the Gambia, will be my lucky year!", a Gambian healer in Rotterdam said.

Most clients have relationship issues, all healers I met tell me. Young women predominate their clientele, often consulting them for issues with boyfriends or husbands. But also family issues of jealousy, often among Moroccan and African families, healers asserted, are common. Furthermore, all healers I spoke to told me about stress caused by the Dutch administrative system: procedures to obtain residence permits, tax regulations, paperwork for social benefits. While some healers said that in those cases, they had to disappoint their clients, telling them that they could not spiritually influence computer systems, others focused on magically manipulating lawyers, social service workers, or tax collectors. Another important group of clients for African healers, I was told, are drugs dealers. Especially Moroccan, but also Surinamese drugs dealers seemed to solicit protection from African healers. A Gambian healer said: "I find it difficult to work for those who live on social welfare. They have a lot of stress and are very anxious. It is easier to work with drugs dealers. There is never a problem about payment and once they trust you, they do not get anxious if they do not see immediately a result."

Interaction between Black Caribbeans and West Africans in the Netherlands

Winti, an Afro-Surinamese religion with a strongly magical aspect (Stephen 1983), is regarded by a number of scholars as incorporating more West African elements than any other magical-religious systems of blacks in the Western Hemisphere such as *Vodou*, *Santería*, or *Candomblé* (Van Andel et al 2013). Enslaved West Africans in the Americas reinvented their language, culture, believes, and use of herbal medicine into creolized versions. Like West African, however, Surinamese and Antilleans use herbs, a belief in spirits, and magical – religious practices such as the use of aphrodisiacs and steam baths to enhance sexual and romantic relationships, and baths, amulets and spells to solve problems concerning health, work, relationships, and in dealings with legal and administrative issues. Magic, poison and sorcery where the few areas in which blacks could manipulate their white masters (Voeks 1993). Winti was forbidden by Dutch law from 1874 until as late as 1971, until the early 1980s by Surinamese law, and was strongly condemned by most churches in Surinam as idolatry (Van Andel et al 2013:10).

After independence from the Netherlands in 1975, a new nationalism appeared, reevaluating cultural identity and traditions (Stephen 1998). A new intelegetsia emerged, reconstructing its own 'Africa' and younger people now refer to Winti as *kulturu* (Van Wetering 1995: 212). In the early 1970s, after the Dutch government announced that the colony of Suriname would become independent in 1975, the number of Surinamese migrating to the Netherlands increased rapidly, and is currently estimated at around 70,000 (Vellenga 2008: 452). Since the 1980's, mainly due to the efforts of the high-educated such as Andre Pakosi and Winti-expert and psychiatrist Henri J. M. Stephen who published extensively on Winti and (mental) health care, Winti practices and believes became known to a wider public in the Netherlands. Still today, however, secrecy remains an important aspect of Winti and the activities of Winti experts (*bonuman*) are rarely openly discussed. In the Netherlands, new forms of Creole culture arose. Surinamese in the Netherlands use, for example Dutch plants such as marigold in their potions and herbal baths, and they visit besides Surinamese Winti experts also Indian Ayurvedic and West African healers (Van Andel 2008).

Most Surinamese migrants, as of the early 1970s, as well as West African migrants, as of the 1990s, settled in the new low-cost outskirts of urban centers or in the older, rundown neighborhoods of inner cities. The Bijlmer in Amsterdam Southeast is a famous example, also called 'little Surinam' or 'little Africa'. Sharing the same geographical and socio-economic space, the relationships between healers and clients stretch beyond the realm of magical-religious practices. Africans and Black migrants from the former Dutch colonies -Surinamese and Antilleans- maintain marital relations and job-related partnerships since the 1990s. For illegal Africans entering the Netherlands, before the change of the law in 2006 (after which all non-western nationals have to pass an exam in the country of origin) the most well-known way to obtain legal status in the Netherlands is through marriage with a Dutch citizen (see also Van Meeteren et al. 2007). Some West Africans paid for contract marriages and after obtaining a permanent status in three years get divorced. Others actively sought a marriage partner with a Dutch nationality, most often Black Caribbean or African, on a non-contractual basis. Three of the healers I met had been married to a Surinamese or Antillean woman and obtained their residence permits in this way. One

met his now ex-wife because she consulted him as a healer. “She came to me because she had problems with her boyfriend”, a Gambian healer in Rotterdam said.

> “She kept coming and then inviting me to her house, and I was surprised when she proposed me to stay with her. I had just left France because there was too much competition among healers there and I tried my luck here in Rotterdam, together with a friend. I was three months in the Netherlands when I met her. When I was six months illegally in the Netherlands when we married. We needed to be married three years for me to get a permanent status. When we were married almost three years she discovered I had a wife and children in Gambia and wanted a divorce. Luckily I had a good lawyer and I got my residence permit in time. We still have good contact though, recently she helped me because she has a drivers’ license and we could rent a car to transport things to a container to export to Gambia.”

Furthermore, undocumented migrants often work using the necessary documents of a look-alike documented African or Black Caribbean migrant (Surinam, Antilles) and in return they give about 30% of their salary to them (see Garces-Mascarenas and Doomernik 2007:14-5, 23, Mazzucato 2008: 209). Another important site of relationships is transnational trade, based on cooperation among ‘fictive’ and ‘real’ relatives (see also Beuving 2006). All but one of the mediums I met were engaged in some form of trade, mostly of second hand cars to be used as taxis or to be resold in Africa, as well as electronics, between the Netherlands, Germany, and their country of origin.

The exchange of papers and partnerships, as well as the relationships between medium and client and between mediums, is characterized by negotiation.[2] West African healers often receive their clients in an ‘African’ and Muslim setting: seated on a carpet on the floor, in a darkened room lit by candles and perfumed with incense, filled with kauri shells, calabashes, plastic bottles with fluids (potions or baths), at times with goat skulls or horns as well, and the walls often covered with Arabic texts or an image of the Kaaba in Mecca, wearing a West African *boubou* including a head covering, holding prayer beads. They often advertise a ‘real and authentically

[2] In which dynamics of trust and skepticism play an important role, on which I elaborated elsewhere (Gemmeke 2012).

African' power on their flyers and websites. This 'authentic African' power is further emphasized in their treatments: they refer, for example, often to their family in 'Africa' (rarely indicating a precise location or even area) and their frequent contact, by telephone and visits, with them. They offer clients consultations with older, more powerful healers in Africa, as well as amulets, potions, and herbs sent from Africa, at the clients' costs. Animal sacrifices such as the slaughtering of chicken and goats are also suggested to be done in Africa. "It is cheaper there," a Senegalese healer living in Rotterdam said, "and you are sure it is done properly. I also have contacts with a farm nearby, and there I can order a goat to be slaughtered as well, but a number of clients prefer that I call my family in Senegal". Even though the setting of the treatments is 'African' and 'Muslim' (clients often visiting a West African healer precisely for the promise of an 'African' treatment), the treatment is not a fixed set of techniques and practices, and neither is the treatment the same as the healer would use in his homeland. "Here, many healers include European techniques such as the use of a person's day of birth and palm reading", a Senegalese healers said. This healer often had discussions with clients, he said, about what belief entails. "People always believe in something," he said. "And I tell him that their believe in plants, or in their health, is the same as my Muslim belief. The importance is to believe in something." Another, Gambian healer said: "It does not matter if the client is not a Muslim, what counts for them is the result, not if I use Muslim prayers or not. But I do take into account what the client expects. From the way a client dresses and speaks, I often know what the expectations of the clients are and what type of work they would like me to do." Three healers told me that they exchange knowledge with other healers to expand their knowledge and techniques and thus meet the reference frames of their diverse, urban clientele. One Gambian healer, for example, told me a Surinamese *bonuman* who runs a nearby '*kulturu*' shop had come to him to learn how a client can see the source of his or her problems in a dream. "I learned from him that Surinamese value plants from Africa since they believe they have special powers".

Conclusion

In the Netherlands, both the belief systems of Black Caribbeans and of West Africans occupy a marginal place in the landscape of Dutch believes and spiritual healing. Moreover, in contrast to other European countries, the number of West African healers is small and recently (as of the end of the 1990s) established. The Netherlands

is, however, of specific interest in the study the diversification of the spiritual market of European urban centers due to globalization, migration in general and in the study of West African healers in Europe in particular, due to the interaction between them and Black Caribbeans of the former Dutch colonies. The transatlantic slave trade and European colonial rule resulted in the travelling of religious ideas, practices and symbols from Africa to the Caribbean, to Europe, and back to Africa.

Afro-Surinamese Winti religion and West African Sufi Islam are, in certain aspects, wildly divergent belief systems. In the Netherlands, however, their shared geographical and socio-economic space gives new, creative dimensions to their shared history as well. After migrating as slaves from West Africa to the Caribbean Black Caribbeans now meet with direct migrants from West Africa in a secular, Northern European country that is highly regulated and skeptical towards both their belief systems. Surinamese, like West Africans, refer to the use of plants and the believe in making sacrifices for spirits, especially when done in the 'homeland Africa' as a source of power in a foreign, at times hostile, and confusing environment.

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