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## ***Capitals and networks : a sociology of Paris' black churches***

**Baptiste Coulmont** (Université Paris 8 & CNRS),

Paper given at the conference “‘African Churches’ in Europe. Mediating Imaginations”  
December 2010, Université Libre de Bruxelles

This paper is the first quantitative analysis of the social world composed by African immigrants' churches in and around Paris, France. The data are based on an unusual material: advertisement posters for religious events. With these data I can conceive of this world as structured by an unequal allocation of capitals and by the establishment of cross-relationships among actors.

Protestant black churches, since the end of the 1990s, have publicly advertised their main religious events. The posters publicize a number of specific elements (location, description of the religious product, hierarchic titles...). With more than one hundred posters (gathered since July, 2008), my paper proposes both a quantitative sociography of this world, and an attempt to theorize its inner working. After analysis, those churches appear to be transnational churches located in poor neighborhoods in the northern suburbs of Paris, they are churches of « pastors » rather than « prophets » (one third of the titles worn by the characters is « pastor »), churches that propose “seminars”, “conventions” or “day” more than half the time (and rarely “crusades”).

Those churches combine in the same move an intense competition and collaborative networking. I use in this paper the invitations and counter-invitations advertised on the posters to draw and analyse part of this collaborative network. It is not a dense network, but it seems to follow some basic rules.

Many studies have been written on individual African churches in Europe (Coyault 2008; Mottier 2008; Fancello 2003; Mokoko-Gampiot 2002). Those ethnographic studies need such a deep involvement that in practice they forbid the possibility to take into account the larger social space in which the churches are embedded. The eye of the ethnographer is focused on the daily interactions. I will bring here a larger focus. We will lose the « thick description » and the individual narratives. You must keep in mind that my intended purpose is to move away from the ethnography and the deep involvement, toward a structural description of the world that black churches constitute.

My paper will be structured thusly :

- 1- I will describe some structural elements of the religious world observed through advertisement posters for religious events.
- 2- I will develop a more theoretical argument regarding the emergence of a structured social world.

### **My data**

I will rely on one type of data : advertisement posters for religious events, glued in a few streets of Paris, the *Château Rouge* neighborhood, a well know African « hub » (Bouly de Lesdain 1999; Vuddamalay 2004). Those posters are recognizable : they figure one or many *black* pastors or prophets and are structurally similar. They differ significantly from concert posters, political posters, or advertisement for CDs, and they have been remarked by many sociologists or ethnographers (Mottier 2008b, p.176; Koukou 2000, p.225; Demart 2008, p.161; Dejean 2009, p.43; Fath 2007), who stress that they visibilize the churches.

Since July, 2008, I have photographed or scanned more than 150 posters and flyers featuring nearly 400 different individuals (identified by their photograph and their names)<sup>1</sup>.

The informations distilled from those posters are rather crude, but they are systematic, uniform and coherent. As Dominique Memmi wrote in a book on political posters : « Because it limits itself to the essential elements of communication, the poster offers a kind of abstract of this communication. Its easily identifiable structure opens the poster to a quantitative analysis. The poster enables us to study, through an important number of supports, the variation of the minimal components of political communication »<sup>2</sup> (Memmi 1986, p.17).

With the posters as only data-source, I move away from certain of the discursive definitions supported by some actors : that is in large part why I will not speak of « African » churches or of « churches of African expression » but of « black » churches. Blackness is here the skin color of pastors and prophets. Outside of skin color, blackness is seldom emphasized on the posters – but so is the « african » identity (an identity that seems to be supported by national association and religious entrepreneurs, but not by local churches).

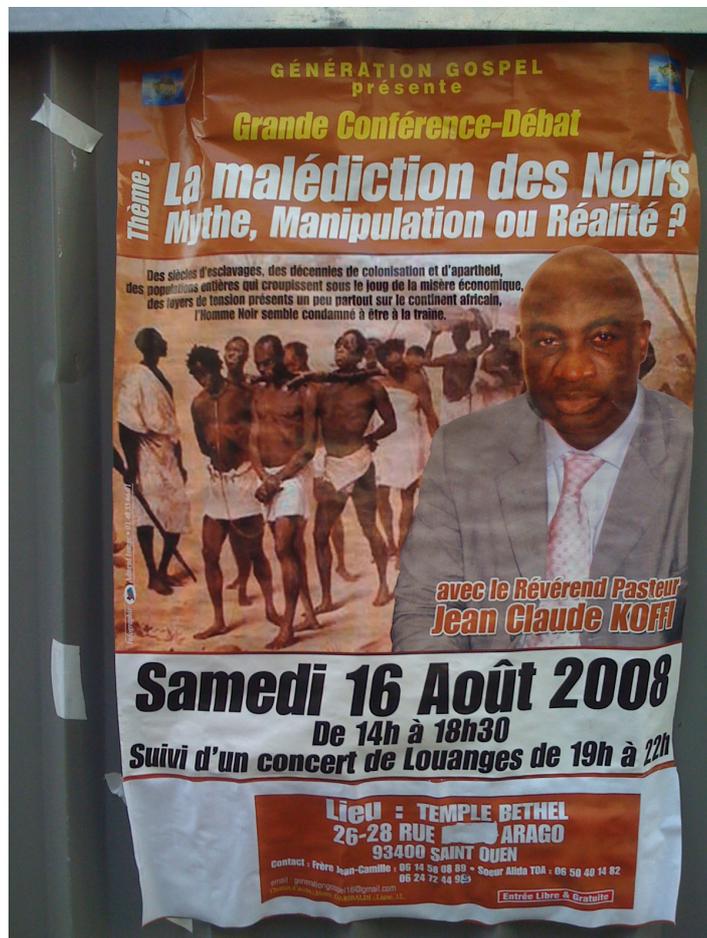


Figure 1 : Are Black people cursed ? Myth, manipulation or reality ?

<sup>1</sup> Some posters can be seen here : <http://coulmont.com/blog/2008/09/07/eglises-africaines/>

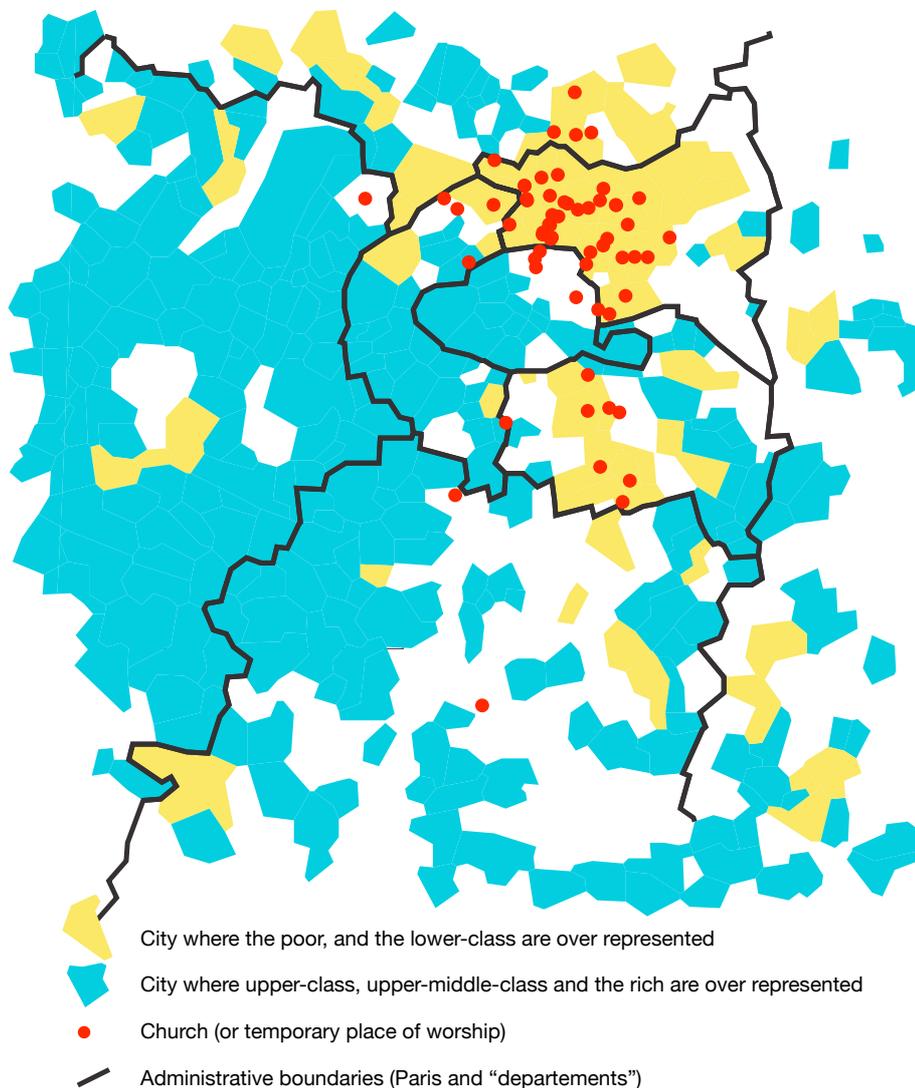
<sup>2</sup> « Se limitant aux éléments essentiels de la communication, elle en offre, par ailleurs, une sorte de résumé. Sa structure plus aisément identifiable la rend donc particulièrement propice à une analyse quantitative. Elle nous permet d'étudier, à travers un nombre important de supports, les variations des composantes minima de la communication politique. »

## Varieties of capitals

In this first part, I will use some of the informations that are purposely present on the posters to describe the churches' specific social homogeneity and internal diversity.

### A geography : local churches

The posters give the location of the place of worship. One does not know from the posters alone if the buildings are owned by the churches : many places are shared by different churches (and some churches have different locations). Taken together, the locations enable a coherent mapping of a rather poor and immigrant community. At the very least, the churches are located in the poorest neighborhoods and cities around Paris. A French would recognize, north of Paris, the « Seine Saint-Denis » department where the majority of black churches are located (even if the posters were gathered inside Paris, far from the churches' locations).



Note : I used informations published in François J.-C., Ribardière A., 2004. « Qu'apporte l'échelon infra-communal à la carte des inégalités de richesse en Ile-de-France ? », *Mappemonde*, n°75.

**Figure 2 : A mapping of black churches : a place for the poor ?**

The Parisian black churches are located in the cities where people with lower income are over-represented. One should not immediately dismiss this ecological correlation : even if the clerical metaphors emphasized on the poster insists on the evidence of intrawordly success, the location of the events (also emphasized on the posters) reveals a social background.

But such a reasoning is only partial : the ecological correlation between lower income and church location is at risk of over-valuing the lack of resources (and would define these churches by what they lack – be it integration to the local space, money, real estate... – and not by what they do). A geographical close-up can help us understand why the black pastors and prophets chose to locate here. The Seine Saint-Denis is still an industrial department : it benefits from a very dense network of rails and roads and from a large number of small warehouse, hotels, meeting places. The religious assemblies have then the advantage of large (and cheaper) spaces, conveniently located near large roads, metro or regional train stations. The local space may be where the poor are over represented, it is also a space where movement is easy.



**Figure 3 : A mapping of black churches : communication nodes**

These two maps taken together highlight the importance of *scale* : the « regional » scale focuses on the lack of resources, the cumulation of disadvantages ; the « local » scale shows here the collective material resources that the churches can mobilize (roads, train stations...). Let's move on to another scale by focusing on the individuals rather than the churches.

### **A geography : transnational actors**

But those churches are not really « local » churches. They are, in many ways, transnational churches defined by the crossing of many borders. The worshipers come overwhelmingly from Africa (be they recent or less recent immigrants) and a few individual worshipers come from other backgrounds.

That is not to say that those churches are « ethnic » churches :

- they do not advertize in African language but in French (and sometimes in English too),
- they do not emphasize ethnic or tribal identity : the only identity is the local one (the name of the town) allied to the Christian one, with a visual emphasis – and seldom a written emphasis – put on blackness,
- they prefer to mark a national state belonging (« Congo-Kinshasa », « Angola », « Nigeria ») rather than a regional or ethnic identity.

On the posters figure many people : the « host » and often one or more « invited » pastors who come from many different countries. Those countries are often mentioned on the posters. It is in part because pastors and prophets are travelling ones. Glick Schiller and her colleagues even wrote about the « international circuit of pastors » (Glick Schiller et al. 2006, p.623). It is also because the « intercontinental scale » makes sense for those pastors (who can be « serial founders » of local churches) whose religious carrier involves the crossing of borders. This « intercontinental scale » describe a *clerical* space.



**Figure 4 : Where do the travelling prophets come from ?**

Invited pastors come from the Americas (mostly the United States and the Carribean Islands), from Europe (Belgium and Germany) and from Africa (Central Republic of Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast...). Those three spaces have different meaning. *The Americas* are where success can be had, they are the mythical place for success : to have an « American » as guest is to take part to his success. *Africa* : many guest-pastors have their own assembly in Congo-Kinshasa or in the neighboring countries. When they come to Europe, it is as « temporary missionaries » (Afe Adogame 2009) who reverse the ancient mission trajectory.

*The third space*, a European space, must be emphasized : the north of Paris, where the black churches are located, is a European space (Fath 2005, p.229). Many cities where the African diaspora is implanted (London, Brussels, Amsterdam, Hamburg...) can be joined by a two hour trip by train from Paris. And pastors can move effortlessly from one city to another. The weakened national borders of Europe (Schengen-Europe at least) enable the emergence of transnational actors. It is not uncommon for someone with an African name to be associated with a European country (for example pastor « Tunde Adebayo » on one poster is mentioned as coming from Ireland).

### **Inequal actors : hierarchy and fluidity**

Until now, I have considered the churches as equivalent *collective actors* : they seem not to differ from one another. They are, of course, different : some own their building, some seem to « own » a bigger cultural capital (indicated by the absence of orthographic errors on the posters, for example)...

The posters reveal moreover a wide variety of *individual religious actors*. These actors differ from one another. They differ by « race » (around 3% of the photographs show people I identified as white). More important for my study : the « size » of the actors is indicated through elements such as the size of the type, the size of the photograph, the placement (central or not). « Big » men, such as Bishops are front and center. « Small » men (and women) such as singers or « sisters », are invisible, only mentioned by a name (or a first-name alone).

But there is a structure in this variety : a structure that combines hierarchy (some actors pile up signs of domination) with fluidity (because there is no strong institution to crystallize the hierarchy, this hierarchy is only valid as long as individuals accept it and stems from personal charisma).

Let us define some salient elements of this structure.

- 1- Men and women are treated differently. *Women are in the minority* and this numeric minority is an indicator of the « assured asymmetry » between men and women mentioned by Maïté Maskens (Maskens 2009, p.66). That is a sizable minority : around 20% of the people are women (22% of the people mentioned or photographed on the posters are women, 78% are men). They are not only in the minority : *they are also less visible*. They are mentioned without photograph more often than men. 40% of the women are mentioned by name and not photographed (and that is only the case for 26% of the men). The feminization of African religious diaspora (Afeosemine Adogame 2008) is far from complete.
- 2- The titles worn by the people on the posters express a wide variety of statuses. One third of the people are « pastors », one out of 9 are « prophets ». If « prophets » have a personal « ministry » and build their ministry on charisma, « pastors » on the contrary, have a church (and a modicum of institution).

**The visibility index** reveals that some titles are worn by « small people ». More than 70% of the « brothers », « sisters », « artists » and of the people with no title are invisible. One third of the « deacons » and « evangelists » are invisible. That is the case for 25% of the « doctors », 15% of the pastors and « apostles », 8% of the « bishops », 7% of the « prophets », 6% of the « reverends ».

**A respectability index** can be constructed through some elements such as the tie. The tie (and some other signs not evaluated here) gives the social « size » (or respectability) of *male* actors : no « singer », no « cantor », no « ancient », no deacon is wearing a tie. 4 out of 10 « doctor », half of the « leaders », 6 out of 10 « pastors » is wearing a tie. The prophets and « evangelists » wear a tie more than 7 out of 10 times.

To summarize : this evangelical-pentecostal world may be individualistic, but it is certainly not egalitarian. There may be only weak institutions, but signs of domination and hierarchy abound and those signs seem to be important to the people wearing them.

This « vertical » division of labor (between « bishops »... and « sisters ») is not the only one. *There is also an « horizontal » division of labor*. It is indeed possible to estimate, thanks to the titles claimed by the people on the posters, the type of charisma indirectly claimed. Some are « bishops », that is the guarantors of institutional order and religious truth. The « Dr. » or « Doctors » present themselves as theologians, guarantors of the truth of the message. Those

« doctors » are not holding a Ph.D.<sup>3</sup> Others are « prophets », that is an interface between God (as a miraculous one) and men.

This « titlemania » should be considered as a practical implementation of *Ephesian 4:11* where the wordly religious activities are described : « *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers* » [In many French translations, « teacher » is rendered as « *docteur* »]. As Damien Mottier wrote, those « five ministries entertain toward each other complementarity relationships and contribute to an “horizontal” repartition of [partially distinct] tasks » (Mottier 2008, p.180). To the prophets : the foundation after a « calling ». To the pastors : the direction of an assembly. To the « evangelists » the itinerant diffusion of religious ideas. To the « doctors » the ideological and doctrinal formalisation. To the « apostles » the implantation of new assemblies.

## Transition

In this first part I wanted to translate some of the posters' elements into variables that could be mapped or counted. Those elements are those by which the pastors and prophets advertise themselves : to them, the location is important (otherwise nobody would come), the size of the photograph is important, the names are important (to be identified in a competitive context). The design and printing of the poster is a strategic and costly investment for many churches.

In the second part, I will gather from the posters elements that are not directly included by the pastors : those elements are not slip of the pen (*lapsus*) but are relational informations.

## Network and macro-structure

Let me stress my argument. There are many ways to describe a structured world (be it a social space, a field or some other concept). When someone is willing to describe the world that, together, the black churches constitute, she usually insists on the collective construction of a collective « spokesperson ». Today, French « african » churches have a voice : the CEAF (the *Community of African-expression Churches of France*) is a voluntary association of churches, duly registered as an association in France. The former and current leaders of the CEAF were either sociology PhD or established pastors (Demart 2010). Those leaders are now contacted by French officials (government, local governments...) and they cherish those contacts (Demart 2010, p.371). They are also somewhat influential in larger protestant / evangelical associations : a vice-president of the main French evangelical association is a leader of the CEAF (a pastor and the wife of a pastor) (Demart 2010).

The CEAF, and another federation of churches, the ECOC (*The Entente and coordination of Christian Deeds*), present themselves as the collective voice of French African churches. Those associations can be used as the indicator that a world is being constructed, that a collective actor slowly emerges who bridges older « French » federation of churches and newer immigrant churches. The speakers and presidents of these associations are also in some ways taken as informant by researchers : the « big men » (and women) seem incontournable and they are willing to expose their conception of the religious field (opposing, for example, fake prophets to respectable established churches).

Such a focus on federative associations often conflicts with the main narrative (or argument) of ethnographic studies of immigrant churches : ethnographic studies stress the everyday networking and the non-relevance of the CEAF or the ECOC. The attentive reader will then see a « gap » between the macroscopic narrative (the constitution of African churches as

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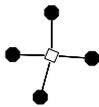
<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Willaime describes their charisma as « *charisme idéologique* » to describe a type that is available where the orthodoxy of the predication prevails (Willaime 2005).

collective actors in French protestantism) and the microscopic narrative (gender power struggles in some churches, the fragility of leadership in some other).

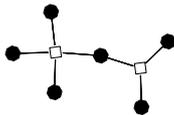
I would like here to stress the analytical usefulness of an intermediate level between the national federative associations of churches (CEAF and ECOC) and the local assemblies.

***Understanding a graph. Methodological introduction***

I'm interested here by the informations on relationships that I can deduce from the posters. I chose to reduce the posters to two elements : the event (a white diamond), the people (black disks). A poster with 4 people is then « translated » to :



Some pastors (for example « Beugré Parfait ») have organized two or more events : he is shown on more than one poster. His participation to two events – one with four participants, the other with three participants) is shown thusly :



Note that the position of each « node » is not relevant : the algorithm used to draw the graph tries to minimize the crossing of links and to put each « node » at an equal distance from its closest neighbors.

Let us look at the first six months of observation (July to December 2008)

July-December 2008

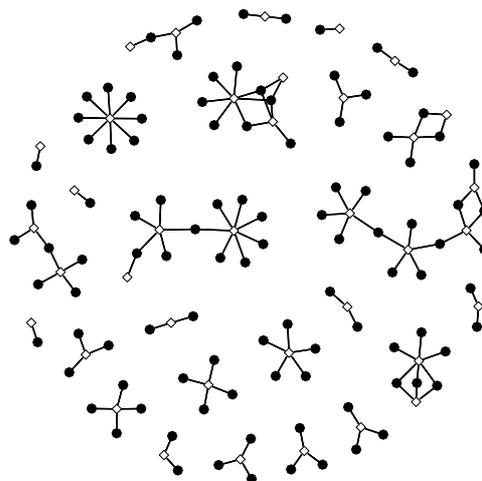
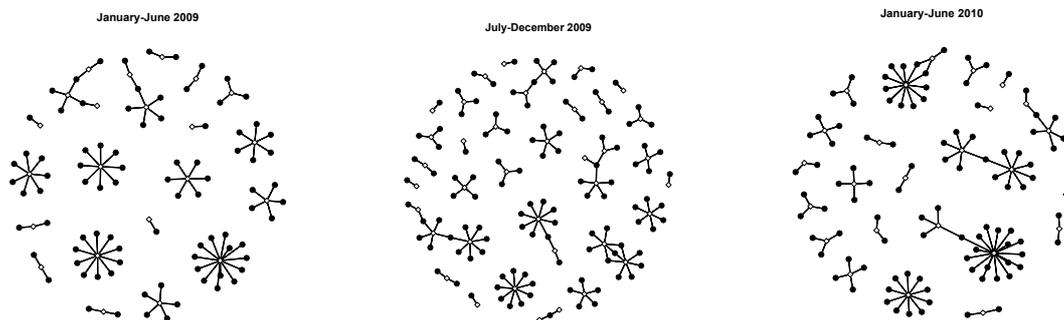


Figure 5 : July-December 2008

We remark that a majority of the people, during the first six months of observation, took part to one event only. Some actors were invited to two or three events. We can already see that the participation to several « crusades » will link together various actors. Those relationships are the support of help, information, « obligations » (gift and counter-gift), but they also « constrain » (it is possible that being linked to someone forbids being linked to someone else, for exemple when two events take place at the same time).

The same conclusion would be drawn by looking at the networks of invitations for the next semesters (January-June 2009, July-December 2009, January-June 2010). By looking at those networks (Figure 6), it seems that the pastors and prophets are mostly non-related to one another, that they are rarely linked.

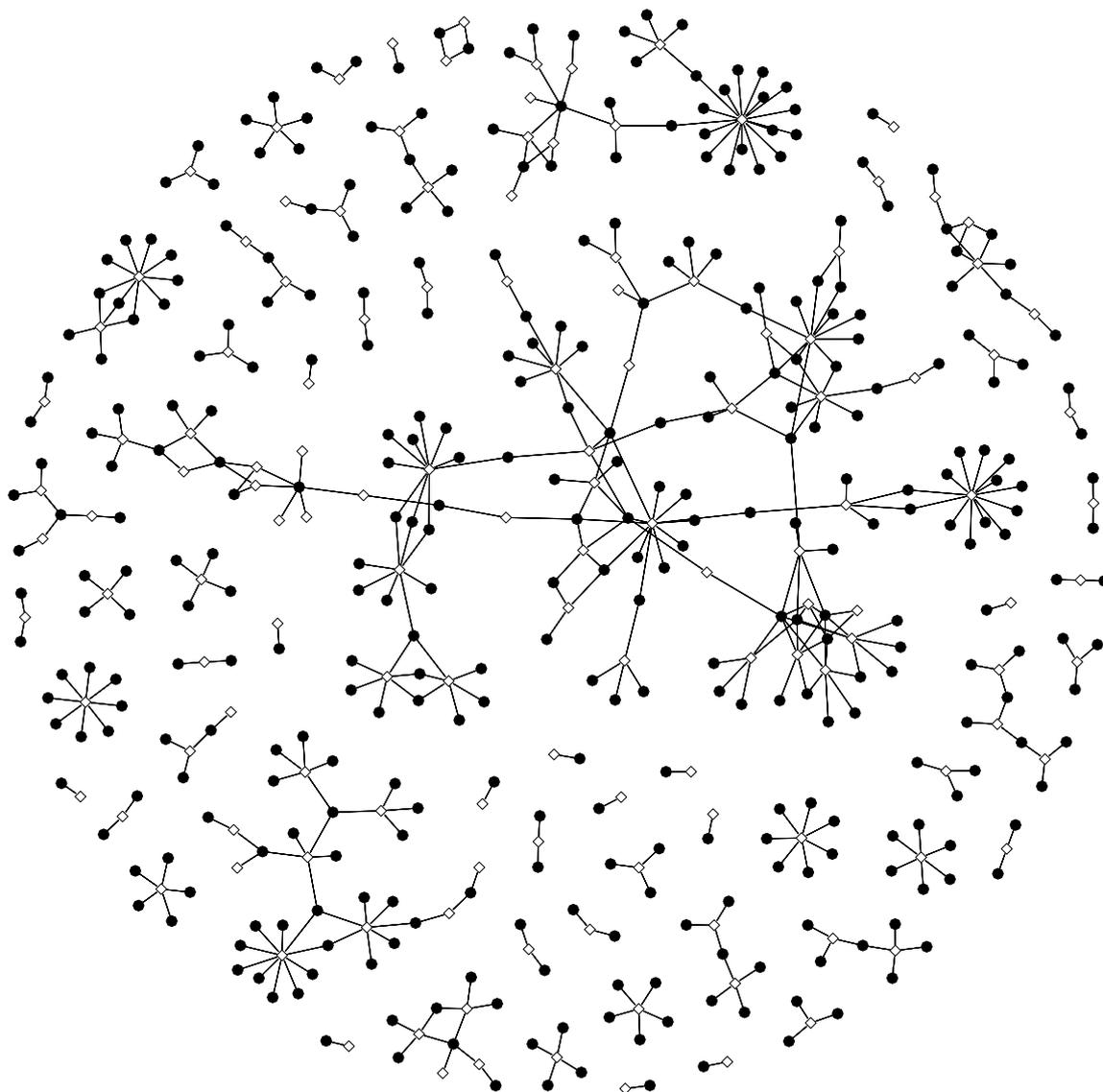
A study based on a short observation period would not gather enough material to understand the network structure.



**Figure 6 : Three periods**

If we take a longer observation time-span, more than six months, more than two years, the network is different. Some actors seem to be much more linked to one another. A structure is emerging : month after month, the sociologist is able to understand that many actors are weakly linked to the others through the common participation to some event. However even after more than two years of observation this world is not yet « closed » : each month, new actors are entering the arena (and many « older » ones, observed in 2008, are not reappearing).

This structure is not yet hardened and solidified, it is less a « fabric » than something woven before our eyes. This social weaving is the material support of the pastors' entrepreneurial individualism (the individualism could not be sustained without the existence of those relationships).



**Figure 7 : Invitation network (july 2008 - august 2010)**

Why is it useful to draw such a network graph ?

### **Usefulness (1) :**

First, there is a relative usefulness : The ethnographer could observe « her » pastor at the center of a network of relationships (she could observe an ego-centric network). But the same ethnographer could not observe links twice removed from her pastor. Peter Bearman said it more elegantly than I can : « *While it is reasonable to think that an individual might have some sense of their own partners' relationships, the structure of the larger components, and certainly the largest component, is not likely to be visible, or meaningful, to the [pastors]. These structures reflect relationships that may be long over, and they link individuals together in chains far too long to be the subject of even the most intense gossip and scrutiny. Nevertheless, they are real.* » (Bearman et al. 2004, p.60)

A « macro » view of the structure generated by the invitations shows that there is no « over-invited » pastor. Out of 371 different persons observed – 75 people took part to more than 1 event (80% of the people appeared only once). Only 9 pastors appeared more than 4 times. Over more than two years of observation, many pastors participated to only one event : clearly, with the formal invitations as data, I can only describe a small part of the relationships.

### **Usefulness (2) : a non-clerical description**

The invitations have many goals. Some are « external » in the sense that a prestigious guest can bring new followers and thus extend the prestige of the local church. Some are « internal » in the sense that this guest could in return invite the local pastor to his church. But this is a clerical explanation : even if we saw previously (in part 1 of this paper) that many actors are not pastors or prophets but are small helping hands, we come back to the pastors and the bishops. On the graph, though, many of the people who were invited more than once are not pastors. They are singers (« *chantres* », « *soeurs* », « *frères* »). The organisers of the « *Conférences* », « *Séminaires* » or « *Croisades* » favor using the « venal charisma » of well known Christian singers. Those singers, contrary to other pastors, have no church of their own (and they will not steal followers). Their career depends on the vitality of the local churches : the more churches, the more they work. The clerical actors with the « biggest » titles (« *bishop* »...) are not always the ones who link together different « constellations » of actors.

### **Usefulness (3) : Trying to formalize**

We can now try to understand how such a network is created : my hypothesis is that two sets of rules are followed (those are « methodological rules », not rules consciously followed). « *It is obvious that, when individuals choose partners, they do not base their choice on its contribution to the global macrostructure. Put most starkly, [pastors] do not account for their partner choice by saying, "By selecting this partner, I maximize the probability of inducing a spanning tree." First, they cannot see the global structure, and second, they do not care about it. They do care, however, about the more immediate local structure in which the partnership is embedded, and they care about the attributes their potential partner has.* » (Bearman et al. 2004, p.67)

- 1- the long chain (and the smaller ones) is can be called a « *spanning tree* ». Such spanning trees are created « if one only makes a new relationship with someone else to whom one is not tied either directly or indirectly » (Martin 2009, p.22). The observed

network is not a « pure » spanning tree : there are some loops. The rule is less stringent : it may be something like « if you do a second crusade, invite someone who was not part of the first crusade » (or, from the point of view of the invited : « accept the invitation of an unknown »).

- 2- *the second rule* seems to be : « do not invite someone who is too often invited ». The hosts prefer to have the exclusivity of the guests. The consequence is that the networking dilute and diffuse authority. It does not create a central actor, directly linked to many other.

### **Network, local churches and associations**

It is now possible to come back to the narrative gap between the associations and the local churches.

The internal attempt to give some backbone to a religious world by creating associations and federations of churches is historically obvious. At the same time, because immigrants were sufficiently numerous, because the travels were easier... religious entrepreneurs began to advertise another possible structuration. Their aim was not to give a backbone to this fluid world. Individually, even the most involved prophet can not grasp the « macro » network in which he (or she) is embedded. But their practice (the diffusion of authority and the invitations given to outsiders) gave birth to an « horizontal » world where competition and collaboration work together.

I think that this network approach (this structural approach) can resolve some of the difficulties encountered by ethnographers when they try to rely on institutional power-brokers (the presidents or former presidents of national associations) to describe the structuration of this religious world. Because I constructed the network by taking into account the everyday concerns of a religious entrepreneur (« how to create a successful church »), and because this networking has the unforeseen consequence to create a world without central actors, then the irrelevance of the CEAF and ECOG federations is better understood.

**Tableau 1 : Three levels of analysis**

	<b>local assemblies</b>	<b>network</b>	<b>federation of churches</b>
<b>visibility</b>	± visible	invisible	visible
<b>secular politics</b>	local politics		access to the national polity
<b>« big men »</b>	pastor (clerics)	diffusion of prestige, important position of non-clerics	big « presidents » (clerics)
<b>institution</b>	yes (but often fragile)	no	yes
<b>identity</b>	« local » (name of town) and « Christian »	informal identity	national and African
<b>diversity</b>	generative of diversity	diversity-neutral ?	limiting of diversity
<b>goals</b>	worship		reconnaissance
<b>structure</b>	formal and visible	only as emerging effects, and invisible to the actors	formal and visible
<b>selection</b>		diffuse and interpersonal	centralised, formalized
<b>surface</b>	local (regional)	local and transnational	national
<b>time</b>		ephemeral links and « weaving »	duration
<b>« clerical »</b>	clerical charisma	« venal » charisma and structural role of non clerics	yes (power detained by pastors) / legal-rational

## Conclusion

Working with posters only generates frustration : it is not possible to know whether the events were successful, not possible to know if the churches have a lot of worshipers... But the same posters can give the sociologist access to the structure of a world otherwise very difficult to study as a whole. The posters enable the sociologist not to rely on professional « identity entrepreneurs », head of national federation of churches, whose activities are deployed toward the national polity, not the local everyday religious worship. Through the informations contained on the posters, it is possible to link « micro » (ethnographic) studies and « macro » general studies of field formation.

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