International Workshop on Migration and Poverty in West Africa
March 13-14, 2003
University of Sussex

Houses, Businesses & Urban Livelihoods:
The influence of transnational networks on economic activities in Accra, Ghana

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Introduction

Samuel is a trader in second hand car parts, operating from a store in the area of Abose Okai where many stores exist from which second hand spare parts are sold. To make himself heard during our interview he has to shout above the noise of other sellers announcing the car brands of the spare parts they sell to cars passing by, who, in turn, manoeuvre between cars parked on the road as they are fixed with ‘new’ spare parts by mechanics and overtake boys pulling small carts carrying goods from one seller to the other, as well as hawkers and others passing by on foot. Samuel, who imports his spare parts from Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands by travelling there a number of times to buy his stock, when asked about the role of migrants in the economy of Accra, states, “Why people respect migrants is because they have a knowledge which leads them to have a different behaviour. ‘Did they get an education when they were over there [i.e. overseas]?’ people ask. This is said because migrants show that they know how to manage their money and use it wisely...” (interview, 2 December 2002).

Samuel’s words show the general perception that migrants are respected2 for their economic success, which can be observed by the cars they are able to import to either sell or drive themselves, the houses they are able to build, and the businesses they establish. While it is known that not all who migrate are able to become, or achieve similar benefits, as burgers3, it is a worthy cause to try and achieve for most. There are two important explanations for this being regarded a worthy cause, one relating to economic aspects and the other relating to cultural factors. Chatting at the offices of the Land Valuation Board in central Accra with Osei, my temporary research assistant, and his colleagues on my research, they comment that migration is a need, as, “The economy of Ghana is too small, the money you earn goes from hand to mouth” (4 January 2003). In general, it is very hard to save enough money to start any profit-making activity beyond micro enterprises as street hawking, working as a labourer, etc. The income earned with such activities is often too low but can also be quite irregular with which the needs, of the individual and the (extended) family, cannot be met. Culturally, Van der Geest (1998) points to the importance that the Akan (as well as other ethnicities in Ghana) accredit to a man who is able to build a house for himself, as well as improving the family house. Those who are not able to do one or both are regarded, and regard themselves, as having failed. The most obvious way of

1 E-mail: L.Smith@frw.uva.nl and vmazzucato@feweb.vu.nl or v.mazzucato@frw.uva.nl
2 Indeed Dam (1997) suggests that the notion of ‘being able to migrate’ already provides social status to the individual before he/she has actually migrated.
3 The term ‘Burger’ is used widely in Accra, especially by those who have not been overseas such as those calling themselves ‘workers’ (employed in lower functions in formal and informal sectors, and who have not (yet) been able to travel outside Ghana/ West Africa). The name ‘burger’ derives from Hamburg, a major seaport in Germany, where many Ghanaians began to work in the 1980s. However the term has a more general meaning, as it can refer to any Ghanaian migrant who has migrated to a Western country. In her thesis de Thouars distinguishes between ‘burgers’ and ‘responsible burgers’. The first category proudly displays their success as migrants by wearing lavish clothes, spending lots of money on visits to bars, restaurants and night clubs, driving ‘flashy’ cars, etc. This may be at the expense of investments in durable income activities and many, having spent their money, have been forced to return to the country to which they had migrated to save from their work again. The second category of ‘responsible burgers’ is regarded to take its responsibilities towards family needs seriously, and make serious attempts at investing their savings in various businesses and houses (1999: 103-108).
avoiding such failure is by migrating to a Western country, to work and save money from this for at least a number of years.

Such migration processes to overseas destinations are seldom organised by individuals on their own. “In fact, migration has been described as a group rather than an individual strategy, in which various people invest in sending the migrant abroad and in return the migrant is under obligation to send remittances home (for example, in Arhinful 1999)” (Mazzucato 2000). Such migrant activity relates to particular institutions to which the (potential) migrant adheres. This also relates to the expected output of migration, “Earning money for oneself is not a legitimate reason to migrate to the Netherlands for Ghanaians (van Dijk 2000). Rather money must circulate and flow back to the motherland to make life there possible.” (Mazzucato 2000). The influence of migration, we argue, extends beyond the sum of the financial means of the migrant as extended to those supported in Ghana. “Migrants also provide a link with new knowledge, new markets and different cultural values. This crossing of cultures, through the migration process, results in adaptations and changes in customs of both migrants’ communities of origin and of settlement” (Mazzucato 2000).

The account of Samuel illustrates the many notions we wish to investigate with regard to the effects of transnational networks of Ashanti migrants on the local economy of Accra. This specific paper presents some preliminary findings based on a two-month stay in Accra in which housing and business projects of Ashanti migrants were investigated. This was done by visits to a number of neighbourhoods that were soon discovered to encompass different kinds of investments and activities to which Ghanaian migrants related. The field research consisted of the following main activities: visits to the neighbourhoods of Abose Okai, Kwasiemian, Dome, Taifa Road, New Achimota. In these neighbourhoods interviews were held with respondents and informants (5 interviews). The respondents interviewed in these neighbourhoods were either owners/managers of businesses (12 interviews), and/or residents (17 interviews). Cross-sections were also conducted in the neighbourhoods of Kwasiemian and Abose Okai. Two Charismatic and one Pentecostal churches, as particular religious institutes that often play a significant role in the lives of Ghanaian migrants, were also visited (on Sundays), and a leading person (elder or pastor) in each church was interviewed. Officers of two major real estate firms were also interviewed. An Ewe funeral, held in Dansoman and Osu (neighbourhoods of Accra), to understand the importance of funerals in Ghana. Finally a number of government institutions were also visited, such as town council offices for the Achimota region, the Bank of Ghana and the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre, to discuss the influence of migrants on particular economic activities pertaining to the local economy.

The project, on which this paper is based, is part of a wider research program (Mazzucato 2000) looking at the effects of Ghanaian transnational networks on particular economic decisions relating to the spheres of investments and insurance. The program is composed of three projects located in three important sites for Ghanaian transnational networks: Amsterdam, Accra and the Ashanti Region. A transnational network is operationalized in this research program as the relationships created and/or maintained by an Amsterdam-based Ghanaian migrant with the people located within and outside of The Netherlands. Different actors within a network are then followed by the three projects over a one-year period in order to study the way in which networks influence decisions and activities aimed at making investments or insuring oneself against risk.

We take a transnational perspective on migration by emphasizing the links that people maintain that cross national boundaries and the flows of ideas, knowledge, money, and people that this generates. The influence of migration, we argue, extends beyond influencing the financial means of the migrant and those he/she supports in Ghana. Migrants also provide a link with

4 It had been intended to visit one or a few funerals of Ashanti in Accra but it had proved difficult to find one to attend in the final month of the first field research. Some significant differences between Ewe and Ashanti funerals have been pointed out by respondents, but as Ashanti funerals have not yet been attended, and this paper focuses on houses and businesses as investments, funerals remain a future topic for discussion.
new knowledge, new markets and different cultural values (Mazzucato et al. 2003). This crossing of cultures through the migration process results in adaptations and changes in the way economic decisions are made and the means used to obtain them.

**Owning a house in Accra**

As already indicated in the introduction of this paper field research has been conducted in one older neighbourhood, that of Abose Okai and a number of new neighbourhood (extensions). The latter were all located to the north of central Accra. The reason for visiting Abose Okai and the other neighbourhoods was that it soon became apparent that economic investments of Ashanti migrants were spread across Accra. With the exception of Kwasieman, where many businesses and residential houses are held by Ashanti, the new neighbourhoods mainly contained the houses owned by Ashanti migrants while their businesses would be tend to be located in the older, more centrally located neighbourhoods of Accra such as Abose Okai.

One of the northern neighbourhoods in which field research was conducted is called Kwasieman. It consists of two main parts, which are divided by the Kwame Nkrumah ‘highway’. The owner of the local drinking spot, located on the corner of the main road passing through the Kwasieman neighbourhood with the Kwame Nkrumah, has witnessed many of the recent changes in the area: “Less than ten years ago the land across the road was bush, even the Nkrumah Road itself was not tarred. Now businesses are springing up all along the road, constructions of which are built by migrants who then rent out the different stores to businesses” (interview, 9 December 2002). Presently, when one looks down from the junction of the Nkrumah road with the Sowothom Santa Maria street (the main road that runs from south to north through the two parts of Kwasieman), one can see down into a valley on to the hill range that lies beyond it. A long thin dust cloud indicates the location of the Sowothom Road, as it quickly turns into a dirt road once some way into the northern section of Kwasieman. It is in bad condition as it can hardly cope with the dense traffic of *tro-tros* and taxis that carry people to farther parts, trucks heavily loaded with building materials to the many construction sites of houses, and private cars. The whole valley has or is in the progress of being built up. Any patches of unused land that remain visible have already found an owner. Yet this is only one of a number of neighbourhoods that has emerged or seen tremendous growth in the past two decades.

A further belt of neighbourhoods located near the main road to Kumasi, such as; Taifa Road, Dome and New Achimota, are further examples of completely new areas of settlement or of rural lands around originally Ga villages sold to the Akan and other ethnicities not traditionally local to the Accra region for building houses on. Indeed many such neighbourhoods have now come to contain more Akan ethnicities than (more) local ethnic groups such as Ewe and Ga. For example in Dome, Baffour-Asare, the local assemblyman, claims more than 90 percent of the house occupants and owners are Akan. Many of these houses have been built by Ghanaians who were, or still are, overseas. These migrants will usually remit money to the person they assign to be responsible for arranging a suitable plot of land, supervising the construction of the house, and making sure it is guarded by a caretaker (Gough & Yankson, 1997:48-54).

Some migrants may only be able to come and see the house they have remitted money for until they are completed. Kojo, a Ghanaian who regularly travels between Canada and Ghana to check on his clothing retail business in Ghana, explains, “The house we are at now is actually the first house I had built for me. It was built by my brothers [extended family]. Although they may have eaten some of the money I sent them I am still happy with the final result, as I had just asked them to find land and build me a house” (interview, 9 December 2002). However other accounts circulate between migrants that tell less happy stories of migrants who, arriving in Accra, find out that their

5 The change of such neighbourhoods as Achimota and Dome is well documented in Denteh (1992). Gough and Yankson provide some explanations of the demographic trends that have occurred in the Accra Region (1997).

6 There seems to be much similarity with the processes noted by Riccio regarding the investments of Senegalese migrants in housing and businesses in urban areas of Senegal (2001:585).
family but also official house construction companies have used the money remitted to them for various other purposes other than for the building of the house. In some instances the location and size of the plot and house turn out to be of low quality, in other situations the responsible family member secretly bought a plot for him- or herself with the difference in the amount charged for the migrant’s plot and that which he claims he/she was charged. As one respondent related, “And when you find this out when you come, what can you do? After all they are your family.” One elder female migrant, arriving in Accra from the United States, found that the house she had been sent videos of throughout its construction, in fact belonged to someone else (pers. comm. Senah, 22 December 2002).

Many Ghanaian migrants staying overseas have become tired of the ‘long stories’ given to them by family members whom they entrusted with the supervision of the construction of their house in Ghana. It has led to situations, various respondents explained, where migrants only build their houses when they themselves are present in Ghana7. Hence one can see many unfinished houses around Accra, with little sign of building activity except when the migrants are in Ghana, such as at Christmas, when much building activity was going on in the neighbourhoods visited. With the recent developments of communication technologies the migrants are now increasingly able to take things in their own hands.

The East Airport Residential Area, located just off the old main road that connects Accra to Tema, is regarded as a desirable area in which to have a house. This neighbourhood is dominated by a number of real estates: large compounds that contain rows of similar, spacious ‘mansions’, fenced off from potential intruders by high fencing and twenty-four hours a day security. These estates, which have only come to exist in the 1990s, have been developed by two of the largest real estate firms: Regimanuel Gray and Manet. They claim that their clients, many of whom stay overseas8, are willing to pay the higher price of a house in one of their estates as this ensures them a ‘high quality house’ in a ‘classy neighbourhood’. Furthermore it avoids them going through the long and enduring process that is the building of a house. Very often the whole building process is an insecure process, which requires much control and trust of those responsible for the construction regarding the appropriation of one’s financial, and other means. Many respondents indicated that it does occur that some of the migrant’s resources might be invested in other activities that the migrant had not intended, or of which he/she is not informed.

Why build a house in Accra?

Various authors talk about the importance in Ashanti culture of building a home in one’s hometown (van der Geest 1998, Arhinful 1999). Why would Ashanti then build houses in Accra and not concentrate their home building in their ‘hometowns’, or at least in one of the urban towns of the Ashanti Region (especially Kumasi), given the cultural and economic affiliations to family and other ties staying there?

Van der Geest, speaking with elders in a rural town of the Ashanti Region, asserts, “If one builds a house, it should not be just anywhere, but in one’s hometown. Building houses in various places but not in the hometown is shameful and senseless. The house symbolises and expresses belonging, so it should be in the place where one belongs.” (1998:352). He explains this to relate to being able to hold a proper funeral ceremony in one’s hometown,

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7 Although generally houses may take up to a few years to complete, progress also depending much on the ability to build up sufficient savings to continue with construction.

8 The sales officer at Regimanuel spoke of 75% of all buyers being ‘non-resident Ghanaians’. This number, he explained, has increased from an original 60% due, on the one hand, to financial difficulties for local buyers to afford a mortgage with a Cidi that is subject to constant depreciation, and on the other hand, is the result of much promotion in overseas destinations with Ghanaian communities there (for example: [www.myghanahome.com](http://www.myghanahome.com)) coupled to the development of communication which enables migrants to examine houses through the internet, exchange queries and information through e-mail and phone with the real estate company, and pay by way of electronic banking.
gaining respect because people who know you can point at your house. Yet Boateng, sales and marketing manager for Manet Real Estates, defending the choice of his customers, is adamant that, “owning a house is what matters culturally, not whether you have built this house yourself, and also no any longer where the house is located.”

Baffour-Asare, the assemblyman for the northern neighbourhoods included in the Kwabenya Electoral Area explains why Ashanti build a house in Accra. After Ghana’s independence (1957) government efforts to industrialize were concentrated in the Accra region (including Tema). Other large towns of Ghana such as Kumasi, Takoradi and Sekondi saw very little industrial development and hence the Akan, but especially the Ashanti, saw that to play a role in such emerging economic activities they needed to come to Accra. Furthermore, their role as traders of gold and cocoa as well as other goods meant that they also passed through Accra. Finally, seeking work as migrants in other countries, initially in Nigeria, but later also in Europe and northern America, strengthened the role of Accra in various activities of the Ashanti as they would often stay for some time in Accra prior to travelling to or from a foreign destination. On departing they needed to be in Accra to arrange visas, aeroplane tickets, or indeed first came to Accra to earn money with which they could afford their envisaged migration to some western destination. On their return to Ghana they would also stay in Accra for some time to arrange the importation and local sale of various goods they had shipped to Ghana (interview, 15 January 2003).

Aryee, director of the Achimota Town Council (responsible for most of the northern neighbourhoods), sets out the context which encouraged the construction of houses in Accra; Firstly, in 1988 the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government of Rawlings introduced a package deal where all who were interested in putting up a building—whatever their purpose—were exempted from paying duties for a five year period. Aryee, “A lot of people jumped at this opportunity, especially in Accra.” Secondly, two years before, in 1986, the PNDC had also allowed the introduction of privately owned foreign exchange bureaux. Before that it had not been possible to bring in money without this going through the Bank of Ghana. Aryee, “This freed a lot of money earned by Ghanaians outside the country and paved the way for money to move in both directions, especially now also from Europe to Ghana.” (interview, January 15, 2003) Thirdly, the early 1980s saw a hyperinflation of the Cedi (the Ghanaian currency) due to a government decision, in conjunction with the IMF, to let the Cedi ‘float’ i.e. undo it from a fixed exchange rate (Moerkamp 1997:60). It meant that property, as a fixed asset, became the safest form of investment. For the ‘Ghanaian Diaspora’; Ghanaians in Europe, America, etc., the inflation of the Cedi meant that the foreign currencies they brought to Ghana could allow them to acquire or construct large ‘mansions’. Many Ashanti, who comprise a significant part of all Ghanaian migrants, had the intention to eventually return to Ghana, this turn of events formed a major incentive for them to invest in houses in Accra. From these houses they could enjoy the attractions and amenities of a large city, manage the businesses they had set up in Accra (usually in the more dense, commercial parts of the city), ...while pressure to provide for needs of the family was reduced by the distance between them and most of their family staying in the Ashanti Region. A research question that emerges from these preliminary findings is whether the choice to build a house in Accra implies a loss of respect for the migrant by his/her family, hometown members, and even fellow Ashanti, or does it gain respect from people regarded more important to the migrant? Further analysis should also ask whether this respect is bound to geographical domains and personal experiences of others who regard the migrant’s building activity.

Aside from these economic explanations, there are also some important cultural aspects to take into consideration. The Canadian migrant Kojon explains, “That is culture, one's manhood relates to whether you have a house...If you have none then when you stand up to speak [at ceremonies and meetings] people ask where your building is.” When asked if this is also true for houses in Accra, he responds; “Increasingly you do find that people may only rent a small apartment because instead they want to show the car

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9 This view is also reflected by Asare who, refers to this process as an “unequal distribution of socio-economic resources” and; “lopsided development planning activities” (1995: 63).
they have. Maybe 10% of all migrants –especially those that are Burgers like
to show the money they have made with the car they drive and the way they
spend their money fast...Burgers are those who have not been
educated...When I am in Ghana I keep a low profile, I live in this house
although I also own bigger ones, I drive in a normal second hand car and
won't wear any flashy clothes. In Canada I do show my gold, drive a big car
and have big houses in which to receive my friends. But here I do not feel the
need to flash my money” (interview, 9 December 2002).

Yaw, as a migrant, worked a long time in factories in Italy, Germany and
Yugoslavia, as well as joining the army of Spain (and attempting to start
business in Iraq), explained that having been able to build a house for himself
in Kwasieman, a house for his wife’s mother and her family in Kumasi, just
completing a house for his father in the Accra neighbourhood of Lapaz has
meant that his ‘mates’ at the Civil Aviation (near Kotoka Airport), where he
had his first ever job, have become ashamed to be near him as they are still
renting their houses in Accra (interview, 17 December 2002).

Research conducted by Gough and Yankson in periphery neighbourhoods of
Accra revealed that, “Although most of the house owners [of whom many
were Akan and nearly a majority had worked and lived abroad] do not
originate from Accra, the vast majority (90 percent) said they will remain in
their new homes rather than return to their home towns in their old age. The
main reason given...was that they will stay in the house that they have built;
most of them have no house in their home town. Some mentioned living
conditions being better in Accra...others the better work opportunities...Some
mentioned the possibility of renting out their house in Accra and living of the
proceeds in their home town.” (1997:51-52)

Furthermore, with a history as migrants they have grown ‘unused and
uncomfortable’ with the idea of sharing a house with the family (pers. comm.
E. Appiah, 27 December 2002). A final reason to add is that living in a house
of one’s own in Accra as a returnee Ashanti migrant means that people will
not ‘bother you’ with everyday requests, as the travel expenses, from the
Ashanti Region to Accra, hamper people from doing so.

Such reasons seem to point to an emerging ‘hyper-urban’ Ashanti population
in Accra, whose ties –social, cultural and economic- to the Ashanti Region
may be very limited or fast reducing. We hypothesize that such clear seeking
of livelihoods based in Accra rather than the Ashanti Region, corresponds with
prioritising those parts of their social networks10 that are also related to
Accra, at the expense of social ties staying in the Ashanti Region. This does
not necessarily implicate that all association with their families, their
hometowns or being Ashanti, is denied, as many hometown associations exist
for Ashanti in Accra, while various events, such as funerals, ensure their
return to their hometowns in the Ashanti Region once in a while. Yet a
change in the geographical orientation of economic activities, away from the
Ashanti Region towards Accra, nevertheless does seem to occur. We intend to
investigate whether this is the case in further field research.

Discussions with informants, caretakers of houses that were under
construction or already completed, as well as migrants present over the
Christmas period, revealed that many of the houses owned by migrants
remain relatively unused. The migrants, who live abroad in Europe or
northern America11, are the sole occupants of these houses, inhabiting these
when they come to Ghana, once or more times a year. Some migrants even
said to own more than one house in Accra. At the same time they claimed
that they would also be involved with the expansion or renovation of the
family house in their rural hometown. These second, third, etc. houses in
Accra, as well as the family house in the hometown, would usually only be
invested in after the own house of the migrant had been completed in Accra.
This house they would assign to themselves –not for use by their extended

10 Manuh spoke of the influence of strong social ties between ‘returnee migrants’ from
Canada. These ties having emerged from having common histories of migration
experiences. This influenced the decision of such ‘returnee migrants’ to settle in Accra,
and preferably also in one another’s vicinity; which they would try to enable by
providing temporary accommodation, selling surplus land to one another and/or
supervising one another’s house construction. (pers. comm., 9 January 2003)
11 There are also Ghanaian migrants in Israel, the Arab states, Japan, Korea, Australia
and elsewhere in Africa, especially in southern Africa) (own field research, 2002).
family (unless the family member was assigned to guard the house, or take care of the children of the migrant while they schooled in Accra, in the absence of one or both parents) - with the other house(s) being rented out until their children grew up and were provided these houses. Indeed one respondent had specifically built a multi-storey house with a number of apartments to rent out. While second or more houses built can have a wide range of uses, as the examples above already indicate, access and use of the first house that a migrant builds in Accra seems to be limited to the conjugal family of the migrant only. This has to do with the continuous demands placed on the migrant, not being used to living in a rural area and no longer sharing the tradition of living under one roof with one’s extended family (de Thouars 1999:108-112).

Manuh indicated that there might be instances where migrants have acquired a house (especially in one of the real estates) yet towards their extended family claim they rent it, to avoid the implications of needing to provide for their needs because they are economically successful (pers. comm., 9 January 2003). Indeed this also occurs with privately built houses, where a well-trusted friend rather than a family member may be asked to supervise the construction of the house, explicitly being asked not to draw attention to this with any family members he should happen to meet. This finding is also corroborated by interviews with Amsterdam-based migrants.

This change in alliances of the migrant with others suggests a significant change in the economic meaning of house building when parts or complete families are kept from becoming involved with house building, in the past a significant income opportunity by itself but also because the money remitted to them for financing the house’s construction could be temporarily or permanently be diverted to other needs or investments. However, is a cultural change also taking place?

Setting up business in Accra

Besides houses many Ghanaian migrants also invest in businesses. Many of these are established in Accra rather than their regions of origin, such as the Ashanti Region for Ashanti migrants. In what ways the establishing of businesses has come about in Accra, and why these businesses are invested in Accra, are issues that we discuss below.

Osei, who was research assistant in the first field research period, is originally from the Ashanti Region but already long time resident in Accra. Normally he works for the government as a land evaluator for Accra. He is particularly involved with the businesses of Ghanaians who stay(ed) in The Netherlands. Osei provides the following account on how the Ashanti migrants came to establish themselves with businesses in Accra:

Many of the Ghanaians who migrated to western (and other) countries as ‘economic migrants’, especially during the early 1980s when many were evicted from Nigeria, lost their jobs with the Ghanaian government, or suffered the consequences of the general drought, were Ashanti. Many of these Ashanti often did not know Accra and its trading businesses well. When they began to visit Ghana from their countries of migration they took many goods along with them, intending to sell most of these in Ghana. As Accra seemed to provide the best market in which to sell these goods they arranged to sell these goods with Kwahu traders.

The Kwahu are another Akan tribe, who have always been much involved with trading activities. They had come to take over the trading business in Accra, especially from the Nigerians, when most of the latter group left the country in the 1960s, under the influence of various government policies. In selling their imported ware to the Kwahu traders of Accra they realized that they themselves were benefiting less than might be possible. Therefore some Ashanti migrants decided to acquire their own stores and retail their goods from these instead of through the Kwahu traders. However the acquiring of such stores in Accra was not simple, as suitable land in the desirable central areas of Accra was scarce and/or too expensive. Hence the Ashanti migrants began to lease plots (and houses) in the city’s central neighbourhoods that were located along busy streets of Accra and belonged to the Ga people. Plots of land are leased for long terms that may range between fifteen and fifty years, depending on the arrangement between the original owner and the migrant and these contracts are usually extended (i.e. re-leased). The
migrant and the owner may also arrange to exchange ownership of the land and its structures. In such a situation the migrant will either build a new house in one of the nearby new neighbourhoods for the owner, or he/she may purchase the land outright. On these plots they set up their stores — which they operate from the original house, or which they erect once they have pulled down all or at least a part of the original house. This manner of establishing one’s business in Accra has become popular amongst the Ashanti migrants.

Jonah, manager of a ‘communication centre’ near the busy crossroad of the Sowothom Road with the Kwame Nkrumah Road in Kwasieman, is an elderly but active man. We sit comfortably on a sofa positioned down one wall of the shop, opposite to the three secluded phone cabins on top of which a TV is perched. While we speak a few customers come to get things photocopied with his assistant and to make calls. There are also quite a few incoming calls.

The reason why Abyenu, his ‘adopted son’, set up the business here four years ago was that it seemed a good location, near the crossroads of a fast growing area of Accra where many people would meet each other and thereby also make use of the communication centre. On one of his visits from Germany, where he has now lived for more than 18 years, Abyenu found the location. Through phone calls and e-mails with family members he had made responsible for establishing the business he was kept informed with the latest news on the business. This news he passed on to his two business partners, who are Senegalese and Canadian, whom he had met during his many years in Europe. In each of their countries they were trying to establish businesses, co-investing in these (interview, 10 December 2002).

A further good example demonstrating that investments made in Accra are not confined to networks and partners from one ethnicity, nationality or place of origin, but can also include a European or American partner, is that of the Regimanuel Gray real estate company. This company was set up as an alliance between Regina and Emanuel, a Ghanaian business couple, with Mike Gray, an American investor. The latter became interested in a partnership with them when he saw what ideas they displayed at their stand on the 1991 International Trade Fair in Accra (interview, 13 January 2003).

What was already becoming clear in the previous section on housing, is corroborated in the above accounts, namely; that relations through which Ashanti migrants invest in Accra are not necessarily kin only. Instead relationships initiated with other migrants while overseas, Ashanti or not, may be extended to Accra. Furthermore, non-Ghanaians are also involved in investments of Ashanti in Accra. Finally, locally bound affiliations, such as through membership of a church, a union or various kinds of clubs, may provide new ties through which investments in houses, businesses or other activities may be organised.

Going back to the example of Jonah’s communication centre once more we ask why Abyenu had set up this business. Jonah, “He felt that it would be best if he invested the money he had put aside in a business. With that business he could then make money with which he could provide for the education of his children and support his family, such as my wife and I, as we are retired.” This intention seems to be working, as Jonah claims that the communication centre provides enough profit to support them all. Abyenu now comes to Ghana about twice a year to visit his family and see how the business is going.

Other respondents indicated that the businesses they were involved with, or responsible for, were also specifically set up by migrants to, in the first place, provide financial support to their extended families in Ghana, as derived from the profit of the business. This was generally perceived beneficial to all involved; the business employs and sustains people while the migrant can concentrate further earnings on other activities, and not be forced to continually deal with requests for financial assistance from his/her family. A communication centre is one of the businesses typically set up by migrants, as they require a certain level of investment that impedes locals from making such an investment. The communication centre run by Jonah provides a good case. Abyenu had to pay an advance for a few years for the rent of the store, he had to acquire and import various machines, such as phones, faxes, and photocopying machines, as well invest in some furniture. Finally, he also acquired an ‘AC’ (air-conditioner) (interview, 10 December 2002).
In this field research different types of businesses were purposely visited that informants expected to usually have been established with inputs—financial capital, ideas and knowledge—from migrants. Examples of such businesses are; communication centres, second hand car dealerships, stores or outlets selling other second hand ware such as household appliances (TVs, fridges), second hand spare parts for cars (including tyres), second hand clothing, travel agencies, construction companies, etc. These are typical businesses relating to migrants, firstly, because they were often established with a savings from migration labour, saving being very difficult in the informal sector that is the largest source of employment in Accra. Secondly, many depend on a transnational network for the supply of goods. For instance, the case of second hand car dealers, and also of traders involved with spare parts for cars, while flying between Ghana and the markets from which they import their goods, they will also depend to some extent on others, usually Ghanaians, who are present in foreign countries, to conduct initial ‘surveys’ of the market12, and sometimes to also buy these goods and even to arrange their packaging and export to Ghana13.

Some businesses are managed and/or owned by the wives of male migrants. Beauty/ hairdresser parlours and seamstress businesses (and to a lesser extent also communication centres) are examples that were provided by informants. Some of these were set up with remittances from the male migrant, others were established through the labour migration of the female owner herself.

If a migrant sets up a new type of business, as in the case of internet cafes and mobile phone stores a few years ago, then other migrants, who are either personally, or through their network, evaluating investment opportunities in Accra, will be quick to copy the idea and set up a similar business. Various respondents said that hence, not only due to a changing economy and needs of customers, but also due to declining profit margins, as others put up a same kind of business meant that one always had to think of new investment opportunities.

Yet why does an Ashanti migrant invest in Accra and not in Kumasi? And why in these particular businesses? One respondent explains, "People like to come to Accra now because it moves faster...its economy allows for faster transactions and businesses to be set up than in those of Kumasi, Tamale or Sunyani. For many people, such as the Ashanti, setting up activities in Accra also means that one is at some distance from one's family who are in the Ashanti Region. When you become successful with something you are less obliged to submit to the pressure of your family to frequently provide small sums of money.” (interview 3 December 2002).

Nevertheless Samuel, who provided the introduction to this paper, explains that both directly and indirectly, "[t]he influence of Ghanaian migrants on the local economy is very great. Think of someone who has imported a truck and employs a driver and second driver to use this truck here...think of all the people who are involved with all the buildings...think of all the people who are able to work in the shops set up by migrants...think of the support that the money of migrants has for farming; if a farm is set up or expanded by a migrant there may be much activity on that farm, and up to 20 people being employed...and think of all the duties that the government is receiving from the things that Ghanaians are importing from elsewhere.” While he acknowledges that each is a small investment by itself, together they are a great influence on the Ghanaian economy. Samuel, “Take this street. Twenty years ago there were four spare parts shops on this whole street, now there

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12 The case of Korean based car makes is interesting in this regard. Initially 2nd hand Korean cars were imported from Western Europe, especially The Netherlands, to Ghana. Realizing that there would probably be more such cheaper cars readily available in Korea itself led to some Ghanaians migrating there (and to Japan) to work there and save money to export cars to Ghana. The spare parts for cars businesses have followed suit.

13 De Thouars speaks of similar processes regarding the establishing of businesses in Accra by returnee Ghanaian migrants (1999: 78).
is a whole street of businesses which each employ a number of people. Yet does that mean that migrants only experience positive things in Europe? Samuel, "Migrants who are staying in Europe - if asked, 'If you have a small capital would you go back to Ghana?' – would all reply ‘yes’ and start a small business here. They are there only because it is difficult to save enough as there many things are expensive" (interview, 2 December 2002).

Clifford and his partner Jerry recently established a construction company. Jerry, who has been living in The Netherlands for more than twenty years, together with his Dutch wife and children. He comes back to Ghana nearly once every two months – to pick up goods (and the inevitable car) from the Tema harbour that he had sent from The Netherlands to sell at his shop, and also to spend his holidays here. In the past Jerry Adjei had worked with various construction companies in The Netherlands. From this he had learned a lot about the construction of buildings and infrastructure. This experience he wanted to put to use in Accra through the company he had established, together with Clifford. In this venture Jerry provides the capital. Meantime Clifford is the day-to-day manager of the firm. Clifford, "We are not one of the big players in the housing business, but we can still play a role, as we provide quality work!" (interview, 2 December 2002).

A second Samuel who is owner of two electrical parts stores and a second hand car lot, "The biggest businesses, as one can clearly see when one looks around this neighbourhood of Abose Okai, deal with cars; second hand parts dealers, car repair lots and also second hand car dealers. The neighbourhood has only become so specialized in cars for about fifteen years. Over these years this neighbourhood has become supplier of cars and car parts to many countries in West Africa. Before that this neighbourhood had primarily been a middle class residential area. The car industry and other related businesses are now pushing the residential area back as it continues to grow" (interview, 29 November 2002). In the past 5 years the most notable new businesses have dealt with communication; mobile phone and accessories sellers, communication centres, etc. Many such businesses, and many of the car industry related businesses, have been set up either by, or with financial assistance from, migrants. It has meant that the neighbourhood of Abose Okai, originally intended as a residential area, has seen the conversion of houses nearest concentrations of businesses as well as the replacement of one floor buildings with two/three storey ones.

The Kwasieman and Dome neighbourhoods, on the other hand, show which businesses are established while a neighbourhood is still relatively new and fast expanding. Most popular, obviously, are those businesses that relate to house construction, providing building materials, woodwork (planks as well as doors and furniture), but also businesses selling second hand domestic appliances as well as services related to communication especially. Many such service businesses as communication, hairdressers, seamstresses, etc. are established in makeshift wooden structures or converted containers. These are often located in front of residences. At a later stage, some ten or more years after the neighbourhood was first established, these temporary structures may be removed as the space is used for more permanent structures in which all sorts of stores can be located.

There seems to be some change in perception of the contribution of migrants’ establishing of businesses in Accra as a contribution to the economy of Accra (and Ghana) in government circles as well as with formal economy representatives. Filson, deputy director of the Research and Development Department of the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC), a government agency, indicates that the Ghanaian government has recently come to understand the contribution that Ghanaians migrants make to the economy of their own country, specifically assigning the GIPC to also promote

14 Ezekiel, a Ga respondent who is long-time resident of Abose Okai, staying in the family house built by his grandfather, notes the 2nd hand stores put up by Kwahu and Ashanti ‘outsiders’ to be a relatively new economic development. Yet it hardly creates local employment, as their owners “take in their own family and friends from their hometowns to work for them, and hardly any local people” (interview, 16 December 2002).
investment in Ghana by Ghanaian migrants. Nevertheless he does feel that this development is a little lopsided, as many investments of migrants are the establishment of yet another small store selling something second-hand, or providing a basic service. Hence the GIPC is focusing on other ways in which migrants can contribute to the (economic) development of Ghana. Filson cites the following example of a ‘new way forward’ for Ghanaian migrants to make more significant contributions to Ghana’s economy: a Ghanaian doctor, working in Germany, wanted to establish a clinic in Ghana. As it was too large an investment for him to alone he found three friends (later six more Ghanaian migrants staying in Germany also joined) who were prepared to share the costs of the investment and derive benefits, in proportion to what they had invested, once the business had started to make a profit. Filson, “All these people [the investors], including the doctor, showed their preparedness to play this game by its rules” As shareholders of the clinic they constitute the board controlling the management of the clinic and derived profit from the clinic as according to agreement. Filson, “It reflects how they have, after staying overseas for long periods of time, come to understand and trust market mechanisms, loan facilities and the business environment in general. Nevertheless much mistrust remains in such common investments and this is an area on which the GIPC is working” (interview, 15 January 2003).

Both accounts seem to fit the opinion voiced by Sefia, who is the consulting editor of Corporate Ghana, a leading business magazine in Ghana. In an opinionated article he discusses the vision of the unorthodox (and, according to Sefia, celebrated) development economist Hernando de Soto. The vision of de Soto focuses on introducing free market economies in African countries that enable everyone in a society to become involved, including the informal sector. Achieving such involvement of all sectors requires radical reform of property laws so that the informal sector can also use their assets to raise finance (access mortgages and issue shares) the way their counterparts of the formal sector can. This would ‘unlock’ most of the capital held by the informal sector (Culpeper 2002:1-2). Such changes could benefit the informal sectors, as they are more able to draw on the range of resources they have access for further investments, nevertheless the legal reforms which de Soto proposes can also have side-effects as they do little to address differences between those with access to resources –be this land, money or other- versus those that are presently without these. (Culpeper 2002:3). The availability of money, but also other forms of capital in western countries, which are inaccessible to Ghanaian entrepreneurs in Ghana, forms a strong reason for Ghanaians to venture there. One respondent, Clifford, relates how it is only since very recent that commercial banks and the government have once again started providing loans to businessmen from the informal sector. Until then such loans were hard to obtain, which had lead people to migrate in order to be able to save a considerable sum with which to invest. Clifford; It is only the economy that made people migrate.” Sefia furthermore notes that de Soto’s reforms for the economy would also require a change with entrepreneurs of the informal sector, who traditionally are mistrustful of sharing their businesses with others and may also often perceive obtaining credit with a bank as being bad to one’s image. (Sefia 2002:13).

Methodological and theoretical ways forward

The previous sections of this paper have shed light on the influence of Ashanti migrants on the local economy of Accra, as related to the construction of houses and establishing of businesses as local investments. Respondents indicated how the past twenty years has seen significant changes in Accra in terms of arrangements made for house construction, their location and their use. Furthermore, local ethnic groups find that ever-expanding neighbourhoods, established to accommodate the housing needs of the Akan (noticeably), are fast swallowing the surrounding areas of Accra.

The first fieldwork provided a first attempt at understanding the influence of transnational networks of Ashanti migrants based in The Netherlands on the
local economy of Accra. It has served to raise further questions and provide focus for further fieldwork. Above a recognition of flows and a directive to concentrate on social networks/groups who no longer necessarily form representation of ethnic, spatial, religious or other entities that were assumed before, “Transnationalism studies focus on how people create livelihoods in a context of mobility rather than on why they move…In making livelihoods within a context of mobility and flows, people create transnational economic spaces in which institutions are renegotiated or new ones are created. The study of these institutions forms the focus of research on transnational economic spaces” (Mazzucato et al. 2003:4).

This is not to say that more traditional concepts of social identity and alliances, such as ‘household’, the ‘extended family’, as well as church, village (or ‘hometown’) and ethnic affiliations are negated. Indeed Clark argues that Ashanti family systems have always been an outcome of constant negotiation of individuals’ agency versus commitments to specific kinship obligations. Clark, “Models which attribute change almost entirely to external demands are particularly difficult to defend for the Asante, whose history of dramatic transformation extends both before and after contact with procapitalist Europeans before Columbus.” (1999:66). Hence the Ashanti have always contested kinship alliances, as they not only had to cope with changing economic circumstances, but also initiated economic activities that influenced their social ties and affiliations. Secondly, for the Ashanti there is little newness in pursuing livelihoods outside their locality (‘hometown’) as an early study such as that of Fortes demonstrates. Fortes’ ethnographic studies of the Ashanti in the 1940s, showed them to have a high degree of urbanization which, “...he called ‘highly diversified’ and its domestic organisation ‘very elastic’.” (1949b, in: Clark 1999:68). Such a level of urbanization would suggest that the next step, to participate in economies elsewhere, such as international destinations, to perhaps have few consequences only for the affiliations and ties involved. Whether these affiliations provide the basis for economic transactions or affect the kind of relationships migrants maintain with people in Ghana is a matter of further research, and not of assumption16.

Our research intends to do this in the following way; A first area of focus concerns the processes by which investments such as houses or businesses are created and maintained. This we do not yet adequately understand. Life histories will concentrate on the history of investment processes, from idea to inception to completion (if applicable). Such analysis should not only relate to the financial, human and other inputs necessary but also to the (possibly diverging) strategies of the different actors involved with the process, the timing of their contributions of inputs and the meaning and reasons they give for accessing these inputs and those provided by others for particular uses and investments (in- and outside the locality they are staying in). For analysis of recent or contemporary processes of investments the triangulation of findings from social network analyses and transactions studies, which we intend to conduct in the three locations of rural and urban Ghana and Amsterdam, should produce insight into actors and institutions involved with particular investments. Through the combination of transaction studies, social network analyses and life histories, we can combine quantitative information on investments as well as qualitative information on how learning, imitation and the creation of assets produce and reproduce investments in a local economy, and how the experiences and imaginations of people shape what they regard as possible and desirable investments.

16 Indeed van Dijk (1997), discussing the role of Pentecostalism in affiliations maintained by Ghanaian migrants, suggests that the church, notably in host countries but also in Ghana, will provide a surrogate family to its individual members, with at its head the church leader. The church may thereby come to compete with, or even replace, the extended family for a migrant as a network through which social, cultural and economic activities are performed.
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