

The Holy Spirit on air in Ghana

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Barely a decade after the deregulation of the Ghanaian media, the broadcasting scene has drastically changed. Privately owned, commercial FM and TV stations are mushrooming, claiming Accra's soundscape from the state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. A whole new popular culture evolves around radio and television, consisting of media personalities, RTV awards, review magazines, and live shows. But what strikes one most is the abundance of religion in the new media scene.

Formerly the State controlled all broadcast media and severely restricted the representation of religion on the airwaves. Churches have now jumped into the new media spaces, opened up by liberalisation in the 1990s, to exploit their religious, commercial and political possibilities to the fullest. Televised church services, radio sermons and phone-in talk shows, religiously oriented video movies, audio-taped sermons, and popular gospel music now occupy public and private space, serving a ready market of enthusiastic young Christians.

Although legally churches may not own broadcast stations, the new media freedom does enable prosperous charismatic and Pentecostal religious leaders to buy airtime with the numerous private and now also State-owned stations. Moreover, many of the new media owners and practitioners are convinced born-again Christians themselves.

As a result, the new media scene is characterised by a strong charismatic-Pentecostal presence. While Christian leaders in the US often depict Africa as the 'dark continent' in desperate need of evangelisation, a vibrant Christian mass media culture is emerging from Africa, from indigenous, independent African churches. Ghanaian televangelists are clearly inspired by their US counterparts, copy their styles, and tie into global charismatic-Pentecostal mass media patterns, but at the same time their media strategies are embedded in the specific Ghanaian context.

A rapidly changing landscape

Sketching the developments of Ghana's media landscape, this article investigates the shift in the relations between the national state, the broadcast media, religion, and commerce, that have opened the way, but also set the parameters for new, public manifestations of religion. It shows how politics of representation changed with political shifts, the development of media

infrastructure, the rise of charismatic Pentecostalism, and the increasingly global and intersecting flows of business, media content, and religion.

Looking at the means and the modes of representation, it argues that the manifestation of religion in the mass media is negotiated in a historically constituted field of power relations. During the 1990s these power relations between the Ghanaian state, different religious groups, media authorities, and entertainment entrepreneurs have shifted in favour of charismatic churches.

'Means of representation' implies questions of ownership of and access to the media. In the era of state ownership, the media served State purposes of national education and 'framing the nation'. Now the State has lost its grip on the media and faces the problem of how to control media content in the context of commercialisation and religious upsurge.

The new political and economic media infrastructure heavily supports charismatic-Pentecostal media strategies. A media concentration pattern evolves that is not dissimilar to the growth of Christian mega-networks and media-heavy mega-churches in the US, with the difference that in Ghana churches may not own broadcast media. A snowball effect, however, attracts big-time sponsors, affluent members, and born-again media owners, supporting a Pentecostal hegemony and excluding other, less affluent religions such as African traditional religion and Islam.

Having access to the means of representation, charismatic churches also influence the dominant modes of representation, the formats, styles, and ways of framing in the public sphere. Charismatic styles of discourse and of worship have a large impact not only on other religions, but beyond institutionalised religion, on popular culture and entertainment, on public debate and opinion, and on politics. The emphasis on emotional expression, personal spiritual experience, and charismatic leadership links up easily with the formats of celebrity, show, and spectacle popular with the new, commercial media.

At the same time, these churches appropriate the language of nationhood from the State, but frame the nation in Christian terms that alienate other religions. What happens is a gradual 'pentecostalisation' of the public sphere (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu, 2001; Meyer, 2004), whereby the boundaries between politics, religion and entertainment get increasingly blurred.

Religion on the Ghanaian airwaves: changing politics of representation

From the introduction of radio in the Gold Coast in 1935 until 1995 radio, and from 1965

television, were controlled by the colonial and post-colonial State and this greatly shaped media practice. Whereas the various subsequent regimes – colonial, independent, military, and civilian – differed much in their use of the media, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC)¹ always served a strong political and educational purpose. Throughout the history of GBC, development of the broadcast infrastructure and programming policies were closely tied to State ideology, be it colonial, anti-colonial, Panafricanist, revolutionary or other. A major concern was always to educate the people and to build a nation.

With a monopoly over the media and media production, the State controlled the public representation of national identity, of past and present events, of morality and immorality, and of religion. Officially, the State extended its policy of religious neutrality to its media policy,

but in practice a subtle, implicit link between the State and mainline Christianity² informed programmes such as Church Service, the main religious programme on GBC-TV, a GBC-production featuring Sunday services in GBC-selected churches. Although the programme was meant to represent ‘the various Christian churches in Ghana’, it clearly favoured the established mainline churches to the exclusion of independent, ‘spiritual churches’ and, later, charismatic churches.

Also, there was a big difference between the mode of representing mainline Christianity and that of African traditional religion. The TV talk show Cultural Heritage, for example, hosted cultural specialists who elaborated specific topics like ‘traditional religion’, ‘cultural festivals’, or ‘libation’, meant to educate the people about diverse cultural aspects of the nation, to restore their pride in Ghana’s ‘rich and colourful heritage’ and to promote ‘unity in diversity’. It disseminated knowledge about, rather than stimulating participation in, traditional religion and was based on an abstract notion of ‘our nation’, with which people were to identify in an almost distanced way. Church Service was rather intended to ‘promote balanced and mature Christian growth, to bring a life changing transformation and personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ’.³

From the late 1970s to 1982 foreign evangelists such as Oral Roberts and Benson Idahosa (Nigeria) could frequently be seen on national television and inspired a wave of charismatic Christian enthusiasm in Ghana. In December 1981, however, Rawlings took power and he was highly suspicious of this new strand of Christianity with its generally negative attitude towards traditional culture running counter to the ideals of his ‘cultural revolution’. He thus banned all foreign religious radio and TV programmes from the airwaves. The neo-traditionalist Afrikania Mission (De Witte f.c.) was the only religious group granted airspace on state radio and the airwaves remained inaccessible for any other religious group.

When Ghana returned to democracy in 1992, the state gradually loosened control over the media, thus giving way to a rapidly evolving private media scene. Today, there are about forty local newspapers and twenty magazines and tabloids available. The number of FM radio stations in the

country has risen to sixty. The public TV channel has been joined by five private TV stations in Accra and Kumasi and a number of cable television providers. A booming local video industry has developed. Access to the Internet is growing rapidly, with many 'comcentres' turning to the Internet business and new 'cafés' opening in almost all urban neighbourhoods.

The commercial nature of the new broadcast stations has two consequences that are especially relevant for the present discussion. First, airtime slots are sold for privately produced programmes. Access to the airwaves is thus available to those with money, excluding those without. Charismatic churches are the keenest buyers. Metro TV, for example, has twelve churches buying airtime. According to the MD, they are one of the best business relations. Even GBC sells airtime to churches now, forced by media competition. As a radio pastor put it, 'religious broadcast has become the bedrock of the media industry in the country'.⁴

Secondly, the commercial stations air much foreign, especially American entertainment programming, both through buying the rights to old foreign productions and through relay agreements with global media networks, including religious ones such as Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), and the Catholic Eternal World Television Network (EWTN). These networks also reach Ghana through satellite and cable TV, but that is still restricted to the rich. Such foreign programmes provide formats for local productions. American televangelists like Benny Hinn, for example, serve as models for the producers of local religious broadcasts (De Witte 2003).

The charismatic-Pentecostal voice is aired not only through such 'media ministries', however, but reaches much wider to inform a much looser, but all the more powerful, Christian inspired and mass mediated popular culture. In what follows I show how charismatic-Pentecostal media strategies are embedded in the new media scene.

The 'pentecostalisation' of the public sphere

More than thirty different Christian broadcasts throughout the week fill about twenty-two hours of airtime on the three TV channels in Accra, mostly concentrated in the weekends and early weekday mornings. Part of it is of foreign origin, but most of it comes from Ghanaian charismatic churches: Sam Korankye Ankrah's Power in his Presence (Royal House Chapel International), Charles Agyin Asare's Your Miracle Encounter (Word Miracle Church), Mensa Otabil's Living Word (International Central Gospel Church), Dag Heward-Mills' Mega Word (Lighthouse Chapel International), to name but a few. Most of these programmes focus on the church's Sunday sermon that is also broadcast on radio. In fact, most started as a radio ministry only and expanded to television later on. On the radio one can hear even more preachers than on television.

The onset of the charismatic revival in Ghana in the late 1970s was already tied to media. Newsletters, books, cassettes, and television programmes by faith preachers like Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, Morris Cerullo, and Benson Idahosa came to Ghana and fed a new Christian enthusiasm (see Larbi 2001). Local prayer groups evolved into churches that started growing exponentially and continue to blossom.⁵ Their positive and productive attitude towards mass media fits well with both their doctrine and ways of worship.

These churches emphasise the personal experience of the Holy Spirit, emotional expression, spiritual healing and deliverance. They proclaim a message of success, achievement, self-making, and prosperity, attracting not only the young upwardly mobile, but also successful executives, businessmen and politicians. Most use English and have a 'modern', cosmopolitan and rich outlook. They emphasise church growth and parade their high numbers of followers, visualising their mass audiences on TV. Moreover, they attach high importance to evangelisation. Media are first of all an effective channel for spreading the gospel of Christ to the masses. But they are also used to enhance an image of success, prosperity, and modernity, to boost the charisma of the leader and manage his public personality, to visualise God's miracles for an audience outside the churches, and to mediate the power of the Holy Spirit to listeners and viewers at home.

Most of the charismatic churches, then, have a 'media ministry,' a church department that occupies itself entirely with the production, sales and broadcast of radio and TV programmes, audio and video tapes and PR material. Some have their own media studio. Already in their early days in the eighties, when the broadcast media were not yet accessible, these new churches produced video and audiotapes of services for circulation through sales, tape libraries, and hand-to-hand exchange. When in the nineties the broadcast media were liberalised, the step from already developed 'tape ministries' to radio and TV broadcast was not that big. Monthly 'tithes', weekly offerings, and other 'seeds' contribute to the large funds at many churches' disposal.

Moreover, because this type of Christianity is so popular these churches can easily get sponsorship for their broadcasts from large companies like soft drink producers, who see a market in the Pentecostal ban on alcohol, or from among their own membership. Successful businessmen are often more than willing to sponsor their churches' media programmes while promoting their business, especially when they contribute their success to the Holy Spirit.

Charismatic media strategies are supported by the fact that many of the private FM stations are owned by confirmed born-again Christians. Although Ghanaian media law prohibits religiously based radio or TV stations, the personal religious affiliation of the owner or manager greatly influences programming, especially because Christian conviction partners well with commercial interest. A remarkable new FM station, for example, is Channel 'R'. Formally it is not a religious station, but, also known as 'the Channel of Righteousness', it plays only gospel music, hosts a lot of preachers, and has phone-in talk shows where people give testimonies of what Jesus has done in their lives, 'all geared towards campaigning for the Kingdom of God'.⁶ Indeed, the director of Channel 'R' is born again and his radio station is a response to 'what the good Lord has done for him when he forgave him his sins and thus won him for his salvation'.

Many radio stations also employ pastors or evangelists as part-time presenters, DJ's, and talk show hosts, independent of their particular church, although most of them are charismatic. Such media pastors have become popular personalities, are interviewed for entertainment magazines, present gospel shows, and are hired by various churches to host or perform on special occasions. These 'religious celebrities' are like a fish in water in the new Christian entertainment scene created by radio, TV, media magazines, and live gospel shows.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, relations between the Ghanaian State, the media, religion and commerce have fundamentally shifted. Politics of representation changed with developments in the technological infrastructure, increasing global media flows, the spectacular rise of charismatic Pentecostalism, and the crisis of the state in framing the nation. From a situation where the state fully controlled the media and gave access to it only to its politically favoured religion, first mainline Christianity and later African traditional religion, this state dominance has now given way to the power of charismatic churches and of the market, which go together remarkably well. The intensive intertwinement of charismatic churches and the broadcast media has generated a religious public sphere, which is characterised by a strong charismatic-Pentecostal control over both the means and the modes of representation. Despite the law that prohibits religious media ownership, charismatics strategically dodge the law and in practice dominate many of the private broadcast stations.

In this new public sphere religion intertwines with both national politics and commerce and entertainment. Charismatic Pentecostalism is part and parcel of the business and entertainment culture of the commercial media, just as entertainment, business and marketing are integral to charismatic churches. Its impact, then, lies not only in its institutional forms and rapidly growing number of followers, but also in more fluid forms of consumer culture and entertainment business. Through the media, it has a widely diffused influence on general popular tastes and styles, that may not be religious per se, but are clearly shaped by charismatic-Pentecostal discourse and practice.

Charismatics also take over the language of nationhood, aiming at and largely succeeding in binding people to an ideal of a Christian nation. Their national commitment, however, implies the marginalisation and exclusion of other religions. Their negative representation of the non-Christian, especially 'fetish' Other in the media have increased inter-religious tensions and conflict. The National Media Commission disapproves of these developments, but it celebrates the freedom of expression, that prevents it from interfering at the same time.

Notes

1 What was first called the Gold Coast Broadcasting Service became Ghana Broadcasting Service with

independence in 1957. Later it became the Ghana Broadcasting System and finally the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation.

2 This unofficial link between the state and mainline Christianity has a history in the old jointed 'package' of missionary Christianity, education and 'civilisation'.

3 GBC-TV programme outline.

4 Interview Rev. Cephas Amartey of JoyFM in Radio and TV Review 28 (2001):57.

5 With 24,1% of the total population and 45,8% of all Christians in Accra regarding themselves as charismatic-Pentecostal, charismatic-Pentecostalism has become the main religious orientation (Ghana Statistical Service 2000).

6 Interview managing director Channel 'R', Radio and TV Review 28 (2001): 50.

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