

Independence Day in a would-be Christian nation

Agency and morality in Ghanaian debates over public rituals

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When the West African nation of Ghana attained its independence from colonial rule in 1957, its traditional culture was to be promoted in all sectors of public life. Similarly, what was construed as Ghanaian traditional religion was to be treated equally with Christianity and Islam. The ritual offering of libations to ancestral spirits and deities was considered the Ghanaian equivalent to Christian and Muslim prayers, and it has been performed side by side with them in all sorts of national events. Later on, the libation ritual became a symbol of both Ghana's religious diversity and its national culture, transcending religious divisions. Many Christian groups, especially from the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, have refused to accept the public status of the libation ritual in view of its alleged immoral 'pagan' associations. When the pouring of libations was removed from the Independence Day ceremonies held at the state capital in 2011, the public debate soon turned to the relationship between the government and Pentecostal churches, and accusations of religious intolerance were levelled. This article discusses how the arguments about the status of the ritual boil down to differences in semiotic ideology and notions about proper agency – namely, how forms of agency pertaining to words, objects, persons and spiritual beings involved in the ritual are understood differently by the disputants.

Bible-oriented Christians (but not the free-going, half-hearted Christians) see libation pouring as an anathema in the context of the Word of God,

especially in Christ's own teachings on prayers in which he never mentioned the pouring of libation as a way of praying. – Apostle Kwamena Ahinful (2015a)

This is a complete case of Taliban Mentality, complete Taliban ... I don't think that it is an oversight. It is a clear case of religious intolerance ... Ghana is a secular state and so we want to see libation being poured. Libation pouring is part of our national heritage. How can you promote culture, leaving out libation? – Journalist Kwesi Pratt (MyJoyOnline 2011)

The two quotations above exemplify the conflicting views expressed on a Ghanaian traditional ritual, the pouring of libations. It is basically a ceremonial offering of drinks to the ancestral spirits and gods, and customarily it has formed an important part of the sacrifices performed during the ritual cycles of local farming communities. During the era of decolonisation, after the Second World War, it was gradually transformed from a traditional religious ritual to a secular nationalistic ritual. As such, and especially as a permanent fixture in Ghana's official Independence Day cele-

brations, it has been attacked ferociously by some Christian groups, especially those who belong to the Pentecostal-charismatic movement. Consequently, its sudden disappearance from the Independence Day ceremonies in 2011 was understood by secularist commentators as a step towards declaring Ghana a Christian nation – despite the fact that there are significant Muslim and traditionalist minorities in the country. This has led to a prolonged, and often quite heated, debate about the acceptability of traditional rituals in the public sphere of the modern nation-state. For the proponents of a secular state, many of whom are also Christians, libation is part of Ghana's cultural heritage, and not essentially a religious ritual. Therefore, it should be celebrated as an expression of patriotism and pride in one's African roots. The Pentecostals, on the other hand, reject traditional ritual life aimed at ancestors and other kinds of spirits as immoral. They identify it as 'idol worship,' which is prohibited by the Ten Commandments, and associate the spiritual beings of traditional cosmology with Satan. Such 'idolatry' is seen to expose people to demonic influences and invite God's anger.

In this article I will discuss how the two sides of this dispute understand the function and meaning of the ritual, on the basis of different semiotic ideologies and notions about proper agency; that is to say, how possibilities for agency pertaining to words, objects, persons and spiritual beings involved in the ritual are understood differently by the disputants. I will begin by giving a short description of the ritual, and then move on to present the theoretical framework, on which the analysis is based. This will be followed by a discussion on how the ritual has become 'modernised' and given a nationalistic meaning – and here questions about agency become

decisive. I will then describe the events that led to the public debates about the status of the ritual. This will be accompanied by an analysis of the Pentecostal critique of the ritual, which highlights its alleged immorality. I will conclude by discussing the political ramifications of the debates, and how the dispute over the ritual reveals two different – but overlapping – understandings of modernity.

The overarching theoretical framework of this article is based on Webb Keane's notion of modernity as a moral narrative about freedom (e.g. Keane 2007, 2013). Modernity is a crucial component of people's self-understanding all over the globe, and its meaning is especially conflicted in post-colonial societies, whose populaces have been governed in the name of modernity and development. An optimistic view of modernity sees it as a break with the traditional past and progress towards a better future (Keane 2007: 48). This often entails an assumption that in the past 'human agency had been misrecognized in the form of fetishes, despots, and demons onto whom it had been projected' and in the end 'the true character of human agency is eventually revealed and thus recaptured' (p. 49). Thus, history is moving in a morally good direction. By looking at the different semiotic readings and moral valuations of a traditional ritual, I will show how Ghanaian secular modernism and Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity both share the optimistic narrative of liberation but disagree strongly on who the true agents of history are. The treatment is based on online research and long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ghana.

Pouring libation

My description of the ritual is based on my own fieldwork among the Asante people

of central Ghana, who belong to a larger ethnic and language group called the Akan.¹ The pouring of libations is nonetheless a widespread ritual form in Ghana, and it has also been studied among other ethnic groups by both anthropologists and historians (see e.g. Kilson 1969; Akyeampong and Ntewusu 2014). In the Asante Twi language to pour libations is expressed with a verb compound *gu nsa*, which literally means pouring of a drink. It is also sometimes referred to as *bo mpae*, ‘to pray’. These days the word *mpae* is usually associated with Christian prayers, but my understanding is that it originally referred to the recitations that accompanied sacrifices to ancestral spirits and local deities. I am not able to do justice to the elaborateness of the ritual and all of its variations, but I summarise the most important aspects of it in relation to the focus of the article.

The basic assumption behind the libation ritual, in its indigenous meaning, is that the present well-being and future success of humans depend on the ancestral spirits and gods, seeing that they are the ones with the powers to make the farmland fertile, provide prey for hunters and help people give birth to new generations. Therefore chiefs, together with priests and other office-holders of the community, are held responsible of maintaining good relations and communicating with the spirit world. This communication takes place through sacrifice. The principal occasions for sacrifices are the calendar rites, during

which blood sacrifices, food offerings and libations are made. However, any person, regardless of age or sex, can pour libation by her or himself, whenever they feel the need to ask help and guidance from the spirit world. For example, it is not uncommon to find a person pouring libation at the outskirts of a ‘lorry station’ in order to secure a safe journey. Moreover, a person often establishes long-term relationships with certain deities and is considered to be obliged to regularly share drinks with them. Accordingly, in my fieldwork, I was often told that ‘when you have a drink, always give some to the gods’. In a rural bar, one might see a person pouring a sip to the ground from their glass before consuming the drink. Libation can thus form a part of a larger communal ritual, or it may constitute a small-scale private ritual by itself.

In a libation ritual, the drink offered to the spirits is poured on the ground, or on specific ritual objects. This is accompanied by a recitation given by the officiant offering the libation. Ethnographers who have studied Akan libations have usually divided the recitation into four parts (see e.g. Yankah 1995: 172–80; Adjaye 2001: 13–40). A comparable structure, with certain modifications, has been applied in the analysis of the libation ritual among other ethnic groups (see e.g. Kilson 1969). During the first part, called the invocation, the spirits are called to receive the drink offered to them. The ‘Creator God’ (Onyame) is addressed first and then the ‘Mother-Earth’ (Asase Yaa). They are followed by nature spirits (*abosom*, sing. *ɔbosom*), and ancestral spirits (*nananom asamanfoɔ*). While mentioning the names of the spiritual beings that are invoked, the officiant will pour a sip after each name. In the message part, which comes second, the officiant states the occasion and purpose of the ritual. This may be a calendar

1 The Akan people live in the coastal and forest areas of Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. In Ghana they are the largest ethnic and language group, constituting roughly 40 per cent of the total population. The Akan language and its dialects are classified under the Tano language family, and include Asante Twi, Fante and Akuapem, which also have their own distinctive written forms.



Figure 1. Empty bottles lined up after pouring of libations at a ritual site. Dutch schnapps gin, sold in green glass bottles, is a popular item used in all sorts of ritual exchanges, for example, funerals and marriage ceremonies. It is also often a preferred drink for libations.

ritual, where a community commemorates and renews its relationship with the founding ancestors and deities, or an ad hoc occasion where help is requested for a particular purpose. In the third part, called solicitation, requests are made to the spirits. Depending on the occasion, they may be very general, pertaining to such things as success, long life and wealth, but they can also be about a specific venture, such as travel plans or a business deal. The concluding part is the curse, in which the enemies of the individual or community are

condemned. The officiant keeps on pouring the drink throughout all stages of the recitation, and refills may be needed. During the recitation performed by the officiant, other participants often gather close to her/him, sometimes bending over or crouching in order to be closer to the spot, where the drink is poured. They may also take part in the recitation by shouting out supportive responses, such as *ampa* ('true') or *wæ* ('yes'). Sometimes the participants may also shout out joyous cheers after the conclusion. After the finale, the officiant and other participants share what is left from the drinks.

In my experience, the beginning and the ending of the recitation are usually formal, and repeated more or less unchanged on every occasion, while in the middle parts there is room for improvisation and eloquence. The solicitation can sometimes get a defiant tone as the officiant challenges the spirits to perform according to human wishes, for otherwise people would not be convinced of their powers. Alternatively, the recitations can sometimes be very brief, and the ritual can also be performed without any speech – by just pouring the drink. In principle, any drinkable liquid can be used in the ritual, but in practice there are preferences. Usually hard liquor is favoured, but palm wine and locally made beer, most often fermented from millet, are also used. The choice has to do with general notions about the value of different drinks, for example, the distinction between imported and locally distilled liquors, but it is also understood that the spirit beings to whom libations are poured have acquired a taste for certain drinks. Most often the drink is poured from a glass or a calabash, but on rare occasions I have seen it poured directly from the mouth of a bottle.

Before expounding how a traditional ritual like libation has become a part and

parcel of modern nationalistic ceremonies performed in public events, I will give an outline of the theoretical ideas on which my analysis is based.

Modernising rituals

My analysis draws its main theoretical inspiration from recent anthropological discussions on ritual and modernity. A number of scholars have in recent decades described and analysed the scepticism – sometimes amounting to antagonism – that modern culture has towards ritual (see e.g. Asad 1993; Douglas 2004; Muir 2005). This has also led them to ask what kind of rituals are tolerable from the point of view of modern reason and sensibilities. Webb Keane's (2007, 2013) contention is that ideas on what sort of religion and religious practices are acceptable in modern society owe a great deal to a model provided by Protestant Christianity. In a nutshell, it could be said that a modern society supports a religion where God is transcendent and does not influence the relations between humans living in a society nor the mechanisms of the natural world. As a result, rituals that aim to persuade God, and through him influence the affairs of the material realm, are seen as futile and misdirected. Whatever effects rituals may have depend solely on human agency expressed through them and the psychological responses they evoke.

This kind of modern secular understanding of ritual conforms to a certain type of semiotic ideology. This term was coined by Keane; in short it can be said to refer to 'people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce' (Keane 2018: 65). Modern ideas about religion and ritual subscribe to a semiotic ideology that could be called referential. It

postulates that the proper function of language is to communicate ideas between human subjects with words that refer to objects in the world or the subjects' inner states (see Keane 2007: 16–25). Similarly, rituals are approached primarily as expressions of thoughts and feelings of those who participate in them. A Christian prayer, where the believer expresses her or his innermost wishes, but where no concrete response from God is expected, would then be a prime example of a modern ritual (see Robbins 2001a: 905–9). A sacrificial ritual, such as libation, on the other hand, does not conform to this ideology. Not only are words used as actions when invoking the different spiritual beings, but the officiant also seeks to influence and convince them to agree to produce the anticipated effects (see Robbins 2001b: 593–4).

In addition to the functions of words and signs, another important modern concern is to discern what sort of beings possess agency and which do not. To many the idea of modernity presents itself as a 'narrative of liberation', where the human subject becomes increasingly aware of his own agency and frees himself from superfluous material or social constraints (Keane 2007: 54–5). According to this line of thinking, correcting erroneous assertions of agency is paramount for achieving individual autonomy, since false perceptions of things acting on the human subject compromise her or his freedom (*ibid.*). Conversely, the acceptance of any kind of 'fetishistic' ideas cannot be viewed as a morally neutral choice or even a simple mistake, because by submitting one's agency to material objects, words or fantasies, a human being transfers her or his responsibility of real actions and events to mere things (p. 77). Thus, when people impute agency to such things as an interventionist God or concretely effective rituals, they are not merely making

an error; they are also morally and politically disturbing and potentially threatening the achieved modernity. In modern ideology the realisation and internalisation of human freedom and responsibility form the achievement that separates moderns from non-modern cultural 'others' and from the non-modern past of the moderns (Keane 2013: 162–3). There are, of course, other, more pessimistic views of modernity, which see it as alienation and destruction of traditional harmonies (Keane 2007: 55), but to see it as progress towards a better future has been important in both religious and secular thinking in the West. What needs to be highlighted here is how the view on agency embedded in the referential semiotic ideology is linked to a view of history that moves towards moral good.

When rituals are modernised, so to speak, their form may stay intact or altered only minimally, but the shared understandings about what takes place in the ritual and what it achieves may change dramatically. For example, Calvin rejected the Roman Catholic belief in transubstantiation, that the bread and wine in the Holy Communion change into Christ's body and blood, and insisted that the Eucharist was only symbolic. The Eucharist remained a sacrament in Reformed theology, but it was denied that it (or any other ritual) had efficacy in and of itself. The 'power' of the ritual was in the faith that the human participants already possessed (Keane 2007: 60–1). Generally speaking, it could be said that in modernised rituals spiritual agents are pushed into the transcendental sphere and rituals are treated as a symbolic activity within the sphere of humans. Human subjects must appear as the sole agents of the ritual, and agentive status must never be accorded to any material forms, such as texts, songs, paraphernalia and so on, or imaginary spiritual beings. In these terms,

the traditional conception of the libation ritual is based on a misunderstanding since it assumes that gods and spirits of the dead can be engaged in a communion or gift exchange with humans. Hence, for libation to become accepted as a part of the ceremonies of a new nation-state its meaning has had to be reinterpreted in modern terms.

Libation in nationalist ideology

The idea of national culture in Ghana has its historical roots in the interaction between Protestant Christian missionaries and the early converts in the nineteenth century. Although the early missionaries labelled indigenous cosmologies 'idol worship' or 'paganism', and the converts were to avoid traditional rituals in any way they could, the missionary project conserved traditional culture in an indirect way. In order to make Christian teachings intelligible to their Ghanaian audiences the missionaries had to find indigenous terms to convey their message. Accordingly, there had to be cultural correspondences that helped the translation, for instance, a decision to start calling the Christian God by a name that was previously assigned to the creator God of the indigenous cosmology. Similarly, correspondences for such central Christian concepts as the soul had to be found from indigenous vocabulary about a person's spiritual constitution. In this way, Christianity and the indigenous cosmologies were seen as comparable and compatible – even though the latter were ultimately to be rejected (Meyer 1999: 54–5). This operation rested on the kind referential semiotic ideology I described above, where words are understood as names of things and the link between the word and the thing is arbitrary, contingent on agreements made by the speakers. Thus, there could be a local language and a cul-

ture – separable from religion – that could be directed to communicate the universal message of Christianity (see Keane 2007: 83–112).²

Moreover, European missionaries had brought with them the idea of a nation based on common language, ethnicity and history. Although the original idea had been to separate the Christian community from the traditional society, especially its rituals, such strong attitudes started to gradually change. Eventually, the ideas and practices of traditional society became distant and abstract for the Christians living in their own ‘enclaves’ or in the urban centres, and they began to evaluate them as parts of an objectified culture, removed from their original social context. Many educated Christians came to conclude that not everything in the past was sinful and, similarly, not all Western ideas were worth adopting. So, when a new modern national identity was created – first around ethnic or linguistic groups and later the former colony – some of the ‘old customs’ were used as its building blocks (Coe 2005: 29–52). This led to the cultivation of national language, history, folklore, costume and the like, but

2 This kind of thinking was taken much further in the post-colonial era, especially from the 1960s onwards, when African theologians started to call for an ‘Africanisation’ or ‘indigenisation’ of Christianity, which meant practising one’s Christian faith without losing one’s cultural identity. In practice, this has entailed such things as incorporating drumming and dancing into the church liturgy as well as giving new Christian meanings to certain traditional concepts and symbols. However, it was always thought that this should never compromise the core message of Christianity and give way to syncretism, which the reformers thought had happened in many of the so-called African Independent Churches (Meyer 1992: 98–103).

many ritual forms of the traditional religion were also incorporated.

Consequently, libations, drumming and dancing could come to be considered as ‘Ghanaian cultural performances’ separated from their earlier ‘pagan’ associations. A Christian watching or listening to them as a member of the audience, or even taking part in them as a performer, would not be perceived as carrying out a religious act, and thus compromising her/his religious conviction, but rather as someone expressing her/his Ghanaian cultural identity. Similarly, some elements of local ritual calendars have been promoted by the state as ‘Ghanaian cultural festivals’. In a certain sense, they have become secular rituals connected to nationalist ideology, and more recently, also to tourism and commercialisation (see e.g. Adrover 2013; Schramm 2004). Their exterior form might in many cases be very similar to traditional ‘religious’ rituals, but they are very different in the sense that they are now primarily understood as symbolic activities.

Although having its origins in missionary Christianity, the endorsement of national culture became a responsibility of state institutions in the post-colonial period; it has been understood as mainly a secular state project (Coe 2005: 52–65). When Ghana attained independence from Britain in 1957, its first head of state, Kwame Nkrumah, was concerned with what he labelled the ‘colonial mentality’. By this he meant the colonial masters’ depiction of the highly sophisticated culture of Africa as primitive, and the indoctrination of Africans’ minds with this notion through Western education. To counter this, Nkrumah called for a ‘new African renaissance’, where all external influences would be evaluated from the point of view of African culture. This meant that Ghanaian traditional culture was to be cultivated in



Figure 2. Independence Day celebrations at the state capital 7 March 2007. In addition to military parades, speeches and cultural displays, the libation performed by a local traditional priest has been a fixture of the festivities. It has been accompanied by Christian and Muslim prayers read by a chaplain and imam of Ghana Armed Forces.

all sectors of public life. Accordingly, traditional religion would be treated equally in relation to Christianity and Islam, which were the two ‘world religions’ practised in the country (see e.g. Nkrumah 1964).

The libation ritual was considered an indigenous Ghanaian equivalent to public prayers, and it was performed alongside Christian and Muslim prayers. Gradually, it has become part and parcel of all sorts of nationalist events, most importantly the official Independence Day celebrations arranged in the state capital (Essel 2014: 40–1).³ On such occasions, a trad-

3 Libations and other kinds of sacrifices were an important part of social and political gatherings in the pre-colonial era, and therefore it is not surprising that they were carried over to the public life of the colonial and post-colonial eras. It appears that

ditional office-holder, such as an indigenous priest, chief or orator, is assigned the task of pouring libations. The Ghanaian capital, Accra, is located in the traditional area of the Ga ethnic group, and hence Nai Wulomo, the Ga chief priest, is usually invited to perform the ritual. As far as I can tell, the structure and content of the modern public rituals adhere to the same pattern as those of their ‘customary’

libations were often accompanied by blood sacrifices in all sorts of public events up until the 1950s, for example in political party rallies (Allman 1990: 263) and the head of state’s formal visits to different localities (Monfils 1977: 315–16). I presume that as Christianity gradually became the majority religion in Ghana during the 1960s and 1970s, blood sacrifices, which are considered distasteful or offensive by many Christians, were scrapped from public ceremonies.

precursors. The only notable differences are that the officiant speaks through a microphone, and the bodily movements involved may be more extravagant, which make the ritual easier to follow from a distance by a large crowd.⁴ However, as pointed out earlier, there are various ways to pour libation, and hence making a distinction between an ‘authentic’ traditional ritual and its modernised versions cannot be based on outward traits. The difference lies in how the ritual is framed and perceived – and not so much in how it is performed.

When libation is discussed in modern religious terms it is most often treated as a prayer directed to God, which is the same as, or at least similar to, the gods of the two monotheistic religions in the country.⁵ More often, however, the libation ritual is mentioned as a part of Ghana’s cultural heritage and therefore acceptable to

all Ghanaians regardless of their religious conviction. Accordingly, the government has included the libation ritual in the cultural studies curriculum, and in principle, it is taught in secondary schools around the country along with drumming, dancing and proverbs (Coe 2005: 120–3, 197). Through this type of education, the secular state seeks to present national culture as a unifying category that transcends religious, political and ethnic divisions in society, and teaches the citizens its correct interpretation. In these instances, libation is kept separate from religious rituals, for example, by emphasising that when libation is poured to the ancestors, the ancestors are thanked, remembered or accorded respect, but never ‘worshipped’. In a web column, a Ghanaian sociologist compared libation to the European custom of bringing flowers to the graves:

To me, culture is simply the way of life (the way we talk, the dress we wear, the food we eat, the language we speak, the traditions, customs, etc.). Pouring Libation is therefore culture, though some consider part of it, especially, calling on the Almighty God, the ancestors, the earth goddess and others for protection, good omen, long life and prosperity, etc. as religion. Though these aspects may appear to be religious, the act itself is not a religion. In fact, it is very similar to the laying of wreaths ... in western societies. When they lay wreaths, they are calling on the dead or ancestors ... (Ata 2011)

It is important to note that in secular discourses about libation, real-life events are never linked to the ritual itself as outcomes or effects. Hence, when libation is discussed as a thanksgiving prayer the

4 The official Independence Day celebrations from Accra are usually televised and live-streamed to the audiences at home. Some recordings are also uploaded to YouTube, with the pouring of libations included (see e.g. JoyNews 2017).

5 As discussed above, libations are traditionally offered to a number of spiritual beings. In theological discussions about the acceptability of libations for Christians, one of the key issues is the recognition of deities other than the Christian God. For example, according to the Roman Catholic archbishop Peter Sarpong, Christians are free to take part in libation rituals when they are performed, for instance, in traditional funerals. For him the traditional libation ritual is a prayer directed to the Creator God, who is considered to be the same as the biblical God. Sarpong claims that the other spiritual agents in the recitations are not ‘deified’ and hence they should be compared to saints in Catholic prayers. He sees their role as non-essential and in his view one way to modernise the ritual would be to omit those parts where non-Christian deities are mentioned (see Sarpong 1996).

underlying assumption is that the things for which thanks are given would (or would not) have happened anyway – regardless of the rituals performed. What the ritual accomplishes, then, is the expression of the thought and feelings of those who take part in it. In the case of the Independence Day, those thoughts and feelings would presumably have to do with patriotism. Especially when it is publicly performed together with a Christian prayer, it is portrayed to the spectators as its Ghanaian or traditional equivalent, which nevertheless rests on a similar logic. The ritual is thus framed with a referential semiotic ideology, which is alien to the calendar rites of the traditional communities whence the ritual originates. There the ritual is all about fulfilling commitments to spiritual agents, which ultimately bring about beneficial outcomes for humans. The personal beliefs, emotions and intentions of the participants are considered irrelevant for its effectiveness.

To conclude, it can be said that in the modern nationalist version of libation the principal instigators and agents are the people, in this case the citizens, who are considered to perform and participate in it of their own free will – in order to express patriotic feelings or national identity, to preserve cultural heritage, and so on – and not under any kind of ancestral or divine obligation. The traditional form of the ritual has been preserved almost intact, but its secular audience places it within a different kind of semiotic framework and also excludes the agency of spiritual beings.

‘Our demonic libation’

As a result of its obvious connections with indigenous cosmologies many Christian groups have found it hard to accept libation as a part of secular national culture. It has been a topic discussed by Ghanaian theologians since the 1950s, and occasion-

ally official events have been boycotted by some Christian churches because of it (Agyarko 2005: 3). Usually, such protests from Christian quarters have not had any effect on state policies. Especially during the governments of J. J. Rawlings in the 1980s and 1990s, traditional culture and the Nkrumahist teachings were held in high esteem (Assanful 2016: 47).

However, in 2011 things took a sudden turn. On Sunday, 6 March, when Ghana celebrated its 54th year as an independent nation, libations were conspicuously absent from public ceremonies held at the state capital. Only Christian and Muslim prayers were performed. At first, the government did not give any official explanation for the absence of libations, but the public debate soon turned to the close relationship between the then president, John Evans Atta Mills, and Pentecostal-charismatic churches in Ghana and abroad. Some described Mills as a religious fanatic, who consulted Christian leaders for his political decision-making, and now it was understood that he had decided to wipe out all the elements of public culture that he considered unchristian (see e.g. Ata 2011). As the debate on the perceived ban on libations became heated, the government issued a statement, where it maintained that no such ban existed, and the reason for scrapping the libations was an on-going chieftaincy dispute among the Ga ethnic group. This official explanation was widely perceived to be a ‘red herring’, and the public focus turned back to the claims about the state imposing Christianity on its citizens (Assanful 2016: 49).

Despite criticisms from opposition politicians, journalists and traditional practitioners, the libation ban also received its fair share of public support. This came from Christian leaders, who appeared to be happy that their head of state was a

true Christian. For example, a self-styled Apostle insisted that ‘our demonic libation must stop’ and praised the president for ‘the elimination of idolatry from state functions because of its serious religio-spiritual repercussions on the nation’ (Ahinful 2015b). As I see it, here the notion of ‘religio-spiritual repercussions’ is the key to understanding why the pouring of libations is so repugnant to some Christians.

Pentecostal-charismatic churches in Ghana relate to political matters differently, but what all of them seem to have in common is that they tend to think and talk about politics in terms of ‘spiritual causality’ that posits a powerful agency for God and Satan in the affairs of the state (Gifford 2004: 161): thus the political situation is a consequence of people’s relationships with divinity more than relationships between people. Some churches claim that phenomena like political violence, poverty and ‘under-development’ are caused by demons, evil spirits or curses, which are very often depicted in terms of the imagery of the traditional religion. In this line of thinking, the people responsible for the suffering of Ghanaians are the ‘pagan’ ancestors and the contemporary traditionalists who have summoned the evil spirits to the African continent and entertained them through heathen worship. Therefore, Ghana will not be able to solve its political problems unless the country is inhabited and ruled by so-called born-again Christians. Another understanding is that Ghana’s political difficulties are a divine punishment for Ghanaian leaders’ failure to obey God (pp. 161–4). Only a few days after banning the libation ritual, President Mills declared that ‘God is the President of Ghana’ (Ghana Forum 2011), and the meaning of his statement has to be understood in the context I just described.

Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity has been characterised as a ‘cult of transformation’ but also a ‘cult of discontinuity’, because the converts are expected to make a complete break with their pre-conversion lives. Once the break has been made, the converts are to keep themselves separate from the surrounding social world by adhering to an ascetic moral code that prohibits most of its pleasures and figures it as a domain governed by the devil. All forms of Christianity emphasise the importance of rupture and change in one way or another, and for the Ghanaian Pentecostals an important question is how to distance themselves from traditional ‘pagan’ practices (see Robbins 2012: 12–13). The interesting point is that pre-conversion ontologies are not abandoned as lies or delusions, but are preserved and regularly engaged with. Consequently, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity accepts the ontological claims of traditional religion concerning the existence of spirits and their powers, but it does not agree on the moral values attached to them (see Meyer 1998; Robbins 2004: 127–9).⁶

As Joel Robbins (2001b: 598–9) points out, the Pentecostals are generally more open to divine immanence in their own ritual life than their Protestant predecessors have been. This is evident in the practice of speaking in tongues, for instance. Consequently, they do not view traditional rituals such as libation merely as a symbolic activity. On the contrary, for them the invocations, solicitations and curses have – at

6 The moral status of ancestors seems to vary in Ghanaian Pentecostal discourses. There are cases where ancestral spirits are directly equated with demons (see e.g. van den Bersselaar 2007: 238), but in other instances it is rather the ‘worship’ of ancestors that is considered immoral (see e.g. Kumi-Amoah 2019: 262–6).

least potentially – effects on the world. To put it another way, they conceive the libation ritual within a very different semiotic framework than the secularists do. On matters relating to agency they appear to align with the traditional understanding of the ritual, but when it comes to moral valuation they could not be further apart.

From a Pentecostal perspective, libation is detrimental on two accounts. Firstly, it evokes spirits, who are considered evil by nature, their ultimate aim being to indebt and enslave humans who turn to them (see van den Bersselaar 2007: 237–43; see also Meyer 1995). From this point of view, the participants in traditional rituals are forced to give sacrifices to the spirits, and have thus lost their agency – but not to delusions, as modern secularists would claim, but to Satan as the adversary of the Christian God. Accordingly, one born-again Christian publication, while commenting on libations in state functions, asked: ‘Who is Ghana worshipping – the Living God through Jesus Christ or Satan?’ (cited in van den Bersselaar 2007: 238). Secondly, since the libation ritual is defined as ‘idolatry’ it is also seen as a direct violation of the Ten Commandments and subject to divine punishment. As one Christian pastor put it, ‘when we pour libation to gods and ancestors and pray to them to meet our needs, we are only provoking God to anger’ (Bonful 2004: 118). In the same instance, he makes a reference to a prophetic vision in the book of Zechariah (10:2), where people follow deceitful idols and diviners and ‘wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd’. According to a literal reading of the Old Testament, the divine punishments extend to future generations as well.⁷ To conclude, the critical issue about

rituals for the Pentecostals is also freedom, but not only from the fetters of collective social norms, conservative ideas and the like, but even more from a hostile and enslaving spirit world.

The fear of a Christian nation

Even though the ban on libation came unannounced, it was not a complete surprise to anyone. As was already implied above, the crucial issue for those who opposed the ban was not the ritual as such, but rather Ghana’s status as a secular state with religious freedoms. Considering the increasing Pentecostal involvement in politics, these concerns could be seen as justifiable. While in the 1970s and 1980s the Pentecostals had sought divine intervention in the country’s political and economic crises by holding prayer meetings and fasting, by the 1990s they had already started to participate in politics more directly, for example, by publicly supporting certain politicians (Asamoah-Gyadu 2014). At the same time, leading figures in the Pentecostal movement began to assert the need for Ghana to become a Christian nation (Gifford 2004: 166–9). Since the movement has also grown in size considerably, it is definitely a political force to be reckoned with in today’s Ghana.⁸

to which knowledge about God cannot be reduced to ‘laws’ or ‘rules’, and it must arise from a personal relationship between God and the believer. In Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity the Bible is nevertheless ‘the basic rule of faith’, but it is not approached as a doctrine but rather as a medium through which God interacts with the believer (Ellington 2013: 153–9). It appears that the strong emphasis afforded to Mosaic law is a characteristic of Ghanaian Pentecostalism and perhaps the Pentecostalism of Sub-Saharan Africa more widely.

7 Generally speaking, Pentecostalism has adopted an ‘anti-legalist’ stance, according

8 According to the national census of 2010, 71.2 per cent of the population are Christians, 17.6 per cent Muslims, and 5.2 per

For some secular commentators the libation ban was indeed the final confirmation that Ghana was now being transformed into a Christian nation. For example, a parliamentary candidate from an opposition party stated that people who complained about the libation ban had every right to be concerned about the future of the secular state in Ghana, since 'in the bid to project Ghana as a Christian nation' people of other faiths were under a risk of being alienated (Ghana Forum 2011). Such a venture would not have been without a precedent in Sub-Saharan Africa, as Zambia had been declared a Christian nation by its constitution already in 1996 (see e.g. Hinfelaar 2011). The repudiation of traditional culture had had an important role in the Zambian case, as the country's president publicly issued an apology, on behalf of the people, where he repented 'our wicked ways of idolatry, witchcraft, the occult, immorality, injustice and corruption' (cited in Asamoah-Gyadu 2014: 171). What is notable here is that religious issues like idolatry, witchcraft and the occult are discussed in the same framework with problems that are conventionally considered societal or political, such as injustice and corruption. This is, of course, related to the notion of divine punishments for immoral conduct mentioned above, and it effectively collapses the distinction between religion and politics so central to modern thought.

cent traditionalists. 28.3 per cent of all Ghanaians consider themselves Pentecostal-charismatic and hence they form the biggest Christian group in the country (Ghana Statistical Service 2012: 6, 40). Of course, it has to be pointed out that census data offer an imperfect reflection of religious reality. Censuses are based on an idea of single religious identity, which is highly problematic, especially in a country like Ghana, where many people do not treat different religions as mutually exclusive categories.

In many of the secularist criticisms of Pentecostalism that have followed the so-called libation ban the modernity of Pentecostalism is questioned and the achievement of secular Ghana is considered to be under a non-modern threat. Often the Pentecostals are compared with non-modern cultural others. For instance, the quotation at the beginning of this article explicitly compared the Mills government with the Taliban administration in Afghanistan, implying that banning libation was virtually the same as destroying ancient Buddhist statues. It is also frequently pointed out that modern people do not believe in the effectiveness of traditional rituals but rather understand how to appreciate them as a part of their cultural heritage. For instance, a web columnist asks why the idea of cultural heritage seems to be problematic only to African Christians:

It is this sad reality due to the colonization of the African mind that concerns me. In every corner of the globe, people respect their tradition and culture in spite of so-called 'modernity'. ... It is only Africans who tend to undermine and disrespect their own culture while hanging on to the 'truths' of received ideas from foreign lands. I have never heard a white Christian Pastor condemn Julius Caesar or any of the Roman and Greek gods. Rather, the collapsing temples of Greek and Roman 'idolatry' are promoted as national treasures, visited by Popes, Cardinals, Pastors, Christians and countless tourists. I wonder if one cannot be an African Christian, and yet remain respectable of what his ancestors accomplished, just as Europeans seem to have done. (Ellison 2005)

What is being suggested here is that the Pentecostals have misunderstood modernity. Instead of objectifying the past and reviewing its meaning for the present, like a proper modern person is supposed to do, they have become obsessed by it. Thus, at least for some liberal secularist Ghanaians, a future life in a polity ruled according to Christian fundamentalist tenets has become a plausible fear.

Conclusions

President Mills passed away roughly one year after imposing the libation ban, while still in office. The ban was first continued but later lifted by Mills's successor President John Mahama, who is also a Pentecostal Christian himself (see GhanaWeb 2016). The opposition-party candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo, won the presidential elections of 2016, and libation has regained its place as a permanent fixture at the Independence Day celebrations after that. However, the fears and hopes about Ghana becoming a Christian nation still linger on, with the latest controversy being Akuffo-Addo's plan to build a 'national cathedral' (see MyNewsGh.com 2018). Similarly, the debates on what elements of traditional religion are acceptable as parts of national culture have not ceased and will most likely continue for a long time.

What I hope to have demonstrated is that both parties to this dispute are on a mission to 'liberate' people according to their own visions of modernity. From a Pentecostalist point of view, the unchristian and immoral nature of the libation ritual has a direct causal connection to political and social concerns, and hence a president is deemed to be obliged to fight against it in the same way as, for instance, corruption. In fact, if political problems are indeed seen as the result of 'pagan' worship and/or disobedience to God, then banning traditional

rituals presents itself as a concrete way of fighting corruption. Ultimately, abolishing the ritual is a way of freeing Ghana from demonic influences and Christianising the country. For the seculars, on the other hand, who see rituals merely as symbolic expressions, the ban is just an infringement of their freedoms, resulting from the primordial religiosity of the Pentecostals. Yet, their own view of modern religiosity also dictates in strict terms what kind of religious practices are acceptable and what not. ■



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