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'THOU SHALT NOT WORSHIP IDOLS': THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND TRADITIONAL CHIEFTAINCY IN GHANA

ABSTRACT

Classic ethnographic studies focusing on traditional chieftaincy in Ghana, West Africa, have revolved around issues such as succession rules, installation rituals, or competition for positions of power. However, becoming and being a chief in a predominantly Christian society, like present-day Ghana, has raised new kinds of concerns. Many churches, particularly those that belong to the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, reject traditional ritual life aimed at ancestors and other kinds of spirits as immoral. Since chiefs are fundamentally ritual leaders, who perform sacrifices on behalf of their communities, chieftaincy has assumed an increasingly negative character in Pentecostal discourses. In them chieftaincy is often equated with 'idol worship' and thus in direct conflict with the Ten Commandments. Ethical rules of 'world religions', such as the Ten Commandments, transcend particularity and their strength is based on an impression that they are applicable everywhere. As pointed out by Webb Keane, this requires mediation work that makes the rules transportable and gives them a potential to be re-contextualized in different places. The article looks at how different interpretations of religious rules are used by Ghanaian Christians and chiefs when debating the in/compatibility of traditional chieftaincy with Christianity. These debates are understood as a part of a process of historical and cultural recontextualization, that is, determining what the commandments mean in the particular time and place that they inhabit.

INTRODUCTION

The very first 'proper' field interview that I ever conducted in Ghana was with an elderly woman who was the female head of her family, involved in a long and gruelling legal battle for a prominent chiefly office, which, according to her, had been unjustly taken away from the family. Many years later, the court case was eventually won, and the office returned to her family, but sadly she did not live to witness that. I had been originally introduced to the old lady by her grandson, who was a good friend of mine. At that time, I was also able to discuss the details of the case with him and his siblings. During those discussions I asked him which one of the current family members would most likely be installed as the new chief if the office would

indeed be given back to them. Curiously enough, in his speculations, he never brought up his own name, even though he was clearly eligible for succession and a capable young man who would without a doubt make a competent chief. Could it be just him being modest? When I finally posed him the question, 'What about you, could you be the new chief?', his answer was quite straightforward: 'No. You see, I am a Christian, and we consider it a pagan practice.' My friend had, in fact, become a born-again Christian some years earlier, following a tragic accident and death in the family. This had meant a total transformation of his life, and as his views on chieftaincy testify, made him re-evaluate the meaning of tradition.

This short field anecdote exemplifies Christian concerns related to traditional chieftaincy in Ghana.[1] Conflicts between chieftaincy and Christianity are not a novelty—they have occurred ever since the pre-colonial era and become more and more commonplace as Ghana has turned into a predominantly Christian country: initially, during the colonial period when the first mass-conversions to Christianity took place, after political independence, when Christianity became the majority religion, and most recently, at the turn of the millennium, when Pentecostalism has become the most popular form of Christianity in the country.[2] Nowadays, many churches, particularly those that belong to the Pentecostal movement, dismiss 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, or associate the spiritual beings of traditional cosmology with Satan. Since chiefs are fundamentally ritual leaders, who perform sacrifices on behalf of their communities, chieftaincy has assumed an increasingly problematic character in Christian discourses.

Consequently, those members of royal lineages who have become born-again Christians waive their succession rights, while those Christians who occupy chiefly offices ponder on the moral acceptability of different forms of traditional culture. This exemplifies the radicality of the religious transformation that Ghana—like many other African countries (see Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2010)—has experienced within a short time.

As a contribution to a special issue on religious rules, this article will focus on tensions between the Christian religious canon and the status of traditional institutions. More specifically, it will look at how religious rules are interpreted by Ghanaian Christians and chiefs when debating the in/compatibility of traditional chieftaincy with Christianity. The rules discussed are the injunctions given in Exodus 20: 1–6 (and Deuteronomy 5: 5–10), often summarized as prohibitions against worshiping other gods and making of idols or images. In the Decalogue they constitute the first or first and second commandment, depending on the Christian tradition in question.[3] The Ten Commandments are a written canonical text and thus their function is to ensure that the word of God is transmitted unchanged from one generation to another. For the believers, writings such as the Decalogue stand as 'a source of law and normative behavior for the past, present, and future, timelessly since the texts themselves are ahistorical, god-given, and enduring' (Goody 2000: 121). In addition to timelessness, their important attribute is universalism. As a proselytizing religion Christianity is not bound to any particular social group or society, and therefore its rules must be abstract and general enough so that they can address a universal audience (Goody 1988: 10–13). Due to their abstract quality, which makes the rules transferrable between

contexts in the first place, they have to be recontextualized in all of the specific settings where they are introduced (Keane 2016: 211–214). Accordingly, when Ghanaians argue whether chiefs 'worship idols' or not, they are participating in such a process of historical and cultural recontextualization, that is, determining what the commandments mean in the particular time and place that they inhabit.

Obviously, not all Christian groups in Ghana interpret the Ten Commandments and their relationship to traditional chieftaincy the same way. Although my treatment has mostly to do with the Pentecostal-charismatic attitudes towards chieftaincy, it has significance for Ghanaian Christianity in general. Firstly, the early conflicts between chiefs and members of both Protestant and Catholic mission churches sprang from the perceived idolatrous nature of traditional rituals just like the contemporary Pentecostal criticisms of chieftaincy. Hence, it can be argued that the Pentecostals are actually carrying on a lengthier historical Christian debate on the acceptability of chieftaincy and other aspects of traditional culture (see Kallinen 2016; 2019).[4] Secondly, even though many churches have nowadays adopted a much more welcoming stance toward traditional culture than the Pentecostals—the post-Vatican II Catholic notion of 'inculturation' being a prominent example—they still consider some parts of it as undesirable and insist that they have no place within Christianity (see, e.g., Mpanga 2017: 67–108; Sarpong 1995: 288–296). Hence, issues relating to cultural change are relevant to all forms of Christianity in one way or another, even if they do not dwell on them extensively as the Pentecostals do (Robbins 2012: 12–15). Thirdly, almost 30% of all Ghanaians consider themselves Pentecostal-charismatic and hence they currently form the biggest Christian group in the country (Ghana Statistical Service

2012: 6, 40). To hold on to their members other Christian churches are often compelled to address similar concerns as the Pentecostals (see, e.g., Meyer 1999: 112–174). The growing membership numbers of Pentecostal churches have also been coupled with another, perhaps even more critical, development. Namely, Pentecostal expressive forms, themes, and narrative structures have diffused to the larger society through modern mass media, which has led to the formation of what Birgit Meyer (2004; 2006) calls a 'pentecostally infused public culture'. Consequently, Pentecostal ideas about what Christianity is, or should be, speak to larger Christian and secular audiences.

My treatment is focused on the chieftaincy institution of the Akan peoples of central Ghana, with whom I am most familiar.[5] Considering that Akan chieftaincy has been a major topic in ethnographic research on Ghana for literally more than hundred years, it is somewhat surprising how little attention Christian chiefs have received (see Gilbert 1993; 1995 for notable exceptions). This may have to do with the emphasis on cultural continuities that was prevalent in twentieth century anthropology (see Robbins 2007a), and the topic appears to have been more popular in theology and religious studies (see, e.g., Kumi-Amoah 2019; Prempeh 2022; Yeboah 2015).

I will start my discussion with an overview of the chieftaincy institution and how it has been challenged by Christianity. This is done mostly in relation to the ritual duties of the chiefs and the rules of succession. I will then present a short historical excursion on the biblical injunction on 'idol worship', and an analysis on what kind of religious rule it constitutes. I will then move on to investigating how the rule has been interpreted in Christian critiques on chieftaincy, and how Christian chiefs have responded to such condemnations. I conclude

by discussing what kind of consequences emerge when religious rules are recontextualized in new social and cultural surroundings.[6]

RULES OF CHIEFTAINCY

Before examining the tensions between traditional chieftaincy and Christianity in closer detail, it is important to discuss briefly the meaning of chieftaincy in the traditional cosmology of the Akan. Customarily, an Akan chiefdom is composed of several matrilineages established on the basis of common descent from a known female ancestor. Accordingly, an Akan person is considered a whole person or a human being through his or her membership in the lineage. The matrilineage is understood to comprise not only its living members but also the unborn and the dead ancestors (*nananom asamanfoɔ*), the greatest of whom are those of the chiefly lineage because they are considered the original 'holders' of the territory where the chiefdom is located. The office of the chief holds a nodal position, since it stands between the living, who are considered the existing guardians of the chiefdom, and the ancestral spirits, who have absolute power over their descendants. The ancestors are understood to use their powers to help the living in their worldly undertakings; however, wrongful deeds by the living bring shame on the ancestors, who do not hesitate to punish their transgressions. Thus, the prosperity and welfare of the living is believed to depend directly on good relations with the ancestors. Because of the fragility of this connection, it is vital that the office vested in the chiefly lineage is occupied by a person who is a matrilineal descendant of the founding ancestor of the lineage and thus close enough to the ancestors to communicate with them via sacrifice. In addition to the spirits of the dead, the chief also gives sacrifices to nature spirits (*abosom*),

charms (*asuman*), and medicines (*aduro*) in order to guarantee the well-being and success of his people. The classical ethnographic accounts of Akan chieftaincy essentially agree with this description (see, e.g., Kurankyi-Taylor 1951; Busia 1968 [1951]; Fortes 1969), and although the contemporary Akan might hold conflicting views on, for instance, the agency and power of the ancestral spirits, these principles still underpin the legitimacy of the chieftaincy institution and its rules of succession. From this background, it should already start to become clear why chieftaincy and Christianity are difficult to reconcile, and why they are so often discussed in either/or terms.

When a chief dies, abdicates, or is deposed, the chiefly lineage is obliged to provide an occupant for the vacant office or otherwise face a possible loss of its status. The final decision on the installation, however, is taken by the council elders, among whom all the constituent lineages of the chiefdom are represented. Theoretically speaking, there is no direct line of succession, and all male lineage members are potential successors. On a more practical level, the Akan themselves have always made a very clear distinction between 'true royals', whom the actual incumbency of office concerns, and 'commoners', who are not directly involved. 'There is a stool [chiefly office] in the family of every Akan [person], but it is only the royals that can have it,' as one of my interlocutors confirmed. In practice the succession may take the form of an aggressive contest between several eligible candidates, or, conversely, it may diminish into collective persuasion of a hesitant, sometimes even reluctant kinsman. In the latter case, his sense of duty is evoked and he is asked to preserve the honour of his lineage. The most extreme anecdotes I have heard are about people being 'kidnapped' and forced to accept the title. All the same, for a born-again Christian royal

a possible candidacy poses an insurmountable problem, as his religion unequivocally forbids him from performing ancestral sacrifices, which is the main function of the chief. From the point of view of the collectivity, the problem is even more dire. As pointed out above, the survival of human society is seen to depend on its good relations with the spirit world, mediated by the chief. Hence, Christians who repudiate chieftaincy are not merely challenging an institution or a role they consider 'outmoded', but they are in fact questioning the foundations of the conventional view of social order.

To go back to the anecdote about my friend which opened this article, his categorical refusal to even contemplate becoming a chief could be considered an example of the idea of 'making a complete break with the past'. This notion was introduced into anthropology through the work of Meyer (1998), and it has subsequently been used to characterize Pentecostal conversion all over the globe. Basically, breaking with the past is a process of self-reformation, in which a person is considered to become a modern Christian by leaving behind certain aspects of his or her traditional culture. Of course, the vast majority of Ghanaians are never offered a chance of becoming a chief, and hence, in their case this specific kind of break with tradition is purely hypothetical. However, many of them have to face similar situations in regard to other forms of traditional culture, for example, when deciding whether they should participate in the calendar rituals of their natal villages.

Clearly, to literally make a complete break with the past is impossible, and the point in Meyer's seminal article was that a born-again believer paradoxically becomes intimately engaged with his/her past as he/she seeks to recognize those aspects of it that expose him/her to immoral influences. Furthermore, as

several commentators on Meyer's work have emphasized, believers have different opinions on how the break is actually achieved and what constitutes good Christian life (see, e.g., Marshall 2009; Engelke 2010; Daswani 2013). The case of my friend actually exemplifies the relative and selective nature of 'making a break'. On the one hand, his views can be read simply as a personal resignation. As a born-again Christian he could not be a candidate for a traditional office, but he had no qualms about other people, such as his own siblings, assuming the office. As he vigorously took the side of his family in the dispute over the office, and years later celebrated their victory, it is evident that he was not on a mission to abolish chieftaincy. On the other hand, however, he very clearly stated that, from a Christian point of view, chieftaincy is a 'pagan practice', which can be understood as a negative assessment of the whole institution. To put it in Webb Keane's (2007: 85) terms, when people accept the sort of universalistic assertions that proselytizing and salvationist religions make, they are forced to 'confront the problem of culture'. That is to say, they have to start making decisions on what must be eradicated or shunned as 'idolatry', 'paganism', and the like, and what can be salvaged as part of the neutral category of culture. Obviously, everything from the past cannot be abandoned since that would amount to a life devoid of meaning, and hence the question is simultaneously what is necessary and what is preferable to save from the past (ibid.). Thus, it seems that the viability of universal religious rules will depend on how radically they are interpreted in the local setting.

Although making a break with tradition is complicated and ambiguous, it nevertheless is, as Girish Daswani has it (2013: 467), 'a public sign of born-again Christian commitment' and, thus, a fundamental aspect of Christian

self-fashioning. For chiefs, who are, or aspire to be, Christians, this expectation appears to be impossible to meet. As people tied to a dynastic institution, they quite literally embody the traditional past and cutting ties with it would require the abandonment of their offices. Thus, 'the problem of culture' for the Christian chief is whether chieftaincy and its accompanying rituals can be plausibly defined as culture or whether they are, indeed, 'idolatry' and to be abandoned. This is not merely a matter of public acceptance, that is, whether chiefs are socially credible as Christians, but also a spiritual concern, as some chiefs fear that performing rituals will bring them to contact with demonic influences that will 'contaminate' or 'defile' them (see Ofori 2020).

In such circumstances, succession to a chiefly office cannot be studied solely from the point of view of competition between different candidates and their factions, as the historians and political anthropologists have mostly done (see, e.g., McCaskie 1985; Robertson 1973). It must be examined also from the perspective of the religious and ethical reasoning of those people who decide to either assume or refuse chiefly offices. This reasoning, of course, includes thinking in terms of obligations and rules. Following Joel Robbins (2007b), it could be said that something which was previously shaped by a morality of reproduction has now become characterized by a morality of choice, and thus a subject of ethical reflection. This, according to Robbins, is typical of situations of radical cultural change, where different value systems that aim to govern social life come into conflict with each other. In other words, when previously a person would be able to perform a moral act by following a rule, in this case, by assuming the office of his predecessor, he is now faced with a situation where he has to either

disobey the rule or offer a new justification that allows him to follow the traditional rule.

FROM ISRAEL TO GHANA

Compared to the succession rules of an Akan chiefdom, the Ten Commandments form a very different kind of set of norms. Besides the obvious fact that they are an ethical canon, and not dynastic rules, their scope is universal and not limited to a particular society or its sub-group. According to Keane (2016: 211–214), the ethical rules of so-called world religions are quite different from clan-specific taboos, ritual regulations, and the like in the sense that they are not 'immediately inhabitable' and need further specification and mediation. He says that the most common way to render abstract principles accessible is entextualization, which refers to 'the processes by which specific chunks of discourse are rendered into texts, by eliminating or altering linguistic features that ground them in a specific context' (ibid.: 211). As texts, religious principles become 'transportable' from one context to another, where they can be recontextualized. The generality of the rules of scriptural religions makes them seem opaque, but on the other hand, their generality may also give them a special aura of wisdom. Since the religious rules are seemingly applicable everywhere, they appear to be more profound than any ordinary rules. As Keane puts it, '[r]ules work in part because they seem to be the same even when they appear in different contexts' (ibid.: 201). Although in principle canonical texts are transmitted in an 'unchanged' form, in practice they are subject to alteration as their composition is manipulated or new interpretations of their meaning are devised. Here the agency and interests of religious elites are of critical importance

(Goody 2004: 120–121). This is clearly visible if one follows the 'travels' of the Decalogue from its historical inception point to the other parts of the world. What is particularly interesting is how the commandments are used in creating exclusive religious identities in different times and places, separating the true adherents from the unbelievers and pagans.

According to scholars of Old Testament exegetics, the different versions of the Ten Commandments that we know today should be viewed as a result of long-term efforts to summarize several existing religious laws into a general set of principles, which were later to become the main tenets of Judaism. Presumably, the first two commandments—the ones most relevant to us here—were among the most recent inventions, as they reflect the development of Judaism into a monotheistic religion with an exclusive identity (Römer 2015: 146–147). The first prohibition, relating to other gods, manifests the transformation of Yhwh from the tutelary deity of Israel to a universal God. Initially, it decreed the Israelites not to follow any other gods, while the later additions to Deuteronomy attest that there simply are no other gods (ibid.: 218). Similarly, the second prohibition, in its oldest form, forbade the installation of statues of other gods in Yhwh's sanctuary; eventually it became a ban on representing Yhwh in images. This prohibition was later interpreted as an attack against all kinds of images (ibid.: 147–149). The commandments were inscribed in the Torah, through which Judaism became a physically mobile religion that could thrive in diaspora (ibid.: 239–241).

In early Christianity the status of the Decalogue was a complex question and in many ways part of the boundary-making in relation to Judaism and Jews (Smith 2014: 2–3). The Ten Commandments did not have an important

role in the Church's teachings during the first millennium, and it was only in the Middle Ages that they started to feature significantly in confession books and catechisms in Europe (Rewentlow 2011: 132–135). Obviously, by this time, the meaning of the categories of 'other gods' and 'idols' had changed considerably. A number of medieval scholars maintained that 'other gods' should be understood as anything and everything that could alienate the believer from the true God. This could be, for example, money, precious things, food, family, or even pride in oneself. Therefore, it would be futile to define or record, who or what the other gods mentioned in the Bible were. They were not exotic foreign deities but rather something that the believer would encounter in everyday life (Smith 2014: 79–81). Idols and idolatry seem to have been similarly open-ended categories. Visual arts were firmly embedded in medieval Christian culture, and they were not explicitly discussed in relation to the commandments. The prohibition of making images was understood to pertain to depictions of fictive beings, that is, things that were not part of God's creation. Hence, idols were images of fabricated gods. The sin of idolatry entailed all worship that was not directed toward God. In practice, this could mean participation in Jewish or Muslim rituals, or dabbling with astrology, fortune-telling, geomancy, and other so-called superstitions. Accordingly, some scholars concluded that the prohibition of idols had nothing to do with visual representation as such but should rather be understood as an extension of the first prohibition concerning false gods (ibid.: 81–89).

Later when the Protestant Reformation was breaking up the religious uniformity of Western Europe, charges of idolatry were levelled against the Papacy and Catholic Church. For example, in Martin Luther's *The*

Large Catechism the term 'other gods' is used, just like in the Medieval era, as a blanket term for everything that might compromise a person's commitment to God, but the 'blindness' of the Christendom under Papacy is also highlighted. Especially the 'worship' of saints is considered so abhorrent that it is put on the same standing with the activities of 'sorcerers and magicians, whose idolatry is most gross' (The Large Catechism 2022 [1529]). For Luther, the injunction against worshiping idols was identical with the prohibition against serving other gods, and hence they are combined under the first commandment in the Lutheran Decalogue (Rewentlow 2011: 139). This was clearly not the case with other Reformation thinkers and movements, who vehemently criticized the idea that material objects, such as paintings and sculptures, could convey spiritual truths (see, e.g., Aston 1996; Van Asselt 2007).

Considering the various Protestant movements in the contemporary era, the most important case for the topic at hand is, of course, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity. Pentecostalism has on the whole adopted an 'anti-legalist' stance, according 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 (Ellington 2013:157–159). In Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity the Bible is, nevertheless, 'the basic rule of faith', not approached as a doctrine but rather as a medium through which God interacts with the believer. Hence, a piece of scripture, such as the Decalogue, can be of highest value to the believer, when it is understood as God's words and s/he is expected to live according to them (ibid.: 153–154). In Ghanaian Pentecostalism the importance of the commandments is perhaps most clearly visible in the popular notion of 'generational curses'. According to

this, such things as illnesses, premature death, poverty, and infertility in the life of a Christian believer are not accidental but caused by curses. This means that the hardships are interpreted as spiritual punishments caused by violations committed by the forefathers and inherited in the family line (Degbe 2014: 254–256). In these instances, direct references are made to Exodus 20:5, where God declares himself 'a passionate God', who punishes 'children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me' (Common English Bible 2011).

There is, of course, an enormous body of theological literature discussing these matters, and the point of my very selective historical excursion is merely to draw attention to how the interpretations of the meaning of the commandments have changed when moving from one religious context to another and, more importantly, how they have been used in creating and maintaining singular exclusive religious identities. Having other gods or worshipping idols equals disavowing God, which potentially leads to an exclusion from the community of believers. This is unmistakably the function that the commandments have in the idolatry accusations against chiefs.

IDOLS AND CHIEFS

The Decalogue had originally 'travelled' to the area of present-day Ghana in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with Catholic clerics (see Obeng 1996: 96–99), but the first translation to Akan languages appears to be from Dutch in 1744, conducted by a Protestant chaplain and former slave, who had received a university education in Holland (Ekem 2007: 73–74). The Bible in its entirety was translated from the original biblical languages by the German Pietist missionary J. G. Christaller, with a team

of assistants who were all native speakers, in 1871 (Eichholzer 2012: 92–93). Obviously, a number of newer translations, in different Akan dialects, have ensued ever since. Consequently, Akan Christians are often well versed with the scripture in both their mother tongue and English.

Idolatry as a denigration or accusation can, of course, be used without any explicit reference to the Ten Commandments. There are various other passages in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, where idol worship is condemned. Furthermore, idolatry already long ago became a generic term used to reject all sorts of indigenous religious ideas and practices (Meyer 2019: 78–79). Therefore, it may be used as a common pejorative without any direct biblical implications. My assumption, nevertheless, is that most Ghanaian Christians are aware of the foundations of the 'idol prohibition' in the Decalogue and often justify claims about the immorality of idolatry by making references to it.[7] Indeed, in Ghanaian Christian discourses on chieftaincy allusions to the Bible and the commandments are common. When chiefs are identified as idolaters in the biblical sense, the accusation is invariably linked to the rituals they perform. The following extract from a Ghanaian internet discussion board should serve as a pertinent example:

In the Old Testament, Moses got the new Laws from the mountains and directly from the one and only God we cannot see but feel in our spirit, and among the laws or Commandments of God he made were: THOU SHALT NOT WORSHIP IDOLS. Nana, I know some of the Chiefs are Christians, and still do this blood over stone sacrifice. Do you think that conflicts with the new post Moses Ten commandments? I have been trying to find out the root cause of our underdevelopment, and (...) I am convinced there is some kind of curse associated

with certain behavior and acts of humans in any society. Not to list all of them but Idol worshipping is one of them, which is also listed in the Bible as against the ten commandments. (Ghana Leadership Forum 2011)

Here idolatry is directly associated with sacrifice and, furthermore, the author also brings up the latter part of the biblical ban, where God declares that he will punish the descendants of the transgressors to the third and fourth generation. According to him, the chiefly rituals have brought about a 'curse', which has condemned Ghana's chances to 'develop'. This obviously conforms with the above-mentioned Pentecostal notion of generational curses. Here, instead of families, whole nations are considered to be suffering from the transgressions of their ancestors, which is in fact a quite common theme in Pentecostalist commentaries on politics. Namely, some churches claim that phenomena like political violence, impoverishment, and 'under-development' are caused by demons or evil spirits, which are very often depicted by using the imagery of traditional religion. According to this line of thinking, the people responsible for the suffering of Ghanaians are both the 'pagan ancestors' and contemporary traditionalists, who have summoned the evil spirits to the African continent and entertained them through 'heathen worship'. Another understanding is that the difficulties faced by Ghana are a divine punishment for failures to obey God's will (see Gifford 2004: 161–164). As explained in the quote above, violating the commandments would clearly belong to the latter case.

Obviously, the biblical prohibition itself does not single out sacrifice as idolatry and linking it to Ghanaian chiefly rituals is part of the recontextualization work performed by the local discussants. The linkage does not simply take place at the stage of linguistic translation,

as none of the Akan renditions of the Ten Commandments that I have encountered draw any equivalency between other gods/idols and the spiritual beings that inhabit the Akan universe. This can be demonstrated by comparing the relevant verses from the Old Testament, which have been reproduced from relatively recent English and Asante Twi Bible translations.

Exodus 20: 1–4

1 Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

3 You must have no other **gods** before me.

4 Do not make **an idol** for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. (Common English Bible 2011)

Eksodɔs 20: 1–4

1 Na Onyankopɔn kaa nsɛm yi nyinaa sɛ:

2 Mene Awurade wo Nyankopɔn a meyii wo Misraim asase so nkoafie mu no.

3 Nnya **anyame** foforɔ nka me ho.

4 Nyɛ **ohoni** biara anaa adeɛ a ɛwɔ wiem wɔ soro anaa deɛ ɛwɔ asase soɔ wɔ fam anaa deɛ ɛwɔ nsuo mu wɔ asase ase nsɛsoɔ biara mfa; nkoto wɔn, na nsom wɔn. (New Revised Asante Twi Bible 2012)

In the Twi version the word *anyame* has been used to designate (other) gods. It is derived from the name Onyame, who is the Creator God in Akan cosmology, and thus a singular being. Therefore, *anyame* is a neologism that appears to have been created for the sole purpose of translation, and as theologians point out, it has no relevant meaning beyond this context (see Ryan 1980; Afriyie 2020). The term used for idol, *ohoni*, denotes a statue in its dictionary meaning. My understanding is that contemporary Akan speakers do not think of it as having any kind of religious or spiritual connotations, although the word's older meaning does link it to traditional healing.[8] Consequently, none of the spiritual beings that chiefs interact with through sacrifice (listed earlier on p. 3) can be directly associated with the 'other gods' and idols mentioned in the commandments.[9] The Akan translation appears to preserve the vague generality of the rule in the Decalogue. The recontextualization of the rule as applying to chiefly practices thus emerges in full force only in subsequent individual interpretations of the text.

CHIEFTAINCY AS CULTURE

Considering the religiously compromised nature of chieftaincy, traditional leaders who identify as Christians have sought to address the matter publicly, especially when interacting directly with churches. This is often done by locating chieftaincy in the neutral realm of culture, which is considered separate from religion and deemed beneficial for nationalistic values such as development. Although secular meta-discourses on Ghanaian culture tend to present it as a unifying category that transcends religious, political, ethnic, and linguistic divisions in society, it is historically rooted in missionary Christianity and the ways in which the indigenous converts sought to tackle 'the problem of culture'. Its origins can be traced to the missionary era when culture was demarcated as a religiously neutral sector of social life that did not pose a danger to the converts. Although the early missionaries labelled local cosmologies as 'idolatry' or 'paganism', and the converts were to shun traditional rituals, the missionary project also depended on them. Namely, to make Christian teachings comprehensible

for their audiences the missionaries had to find indigenous terms to convey their message. Accordingly, there had to be cultural equivalences that facilitated the translation; for instance, correspondences for such central Christian concepts like the soul had to found from indigenous vocabulary about the spiritual constitution of a person. This way, Christianity and the indigenous cosmologies were seen as comparable and compatible—even though the latter were to be ultimately rejected (Meyer 1999: 52–62). Thus, it was necessary to have a local language and a culture—separable from religion—that could be used in communicating the universal message of Christianity (see Keane 2007: 83–112).

Furthermore, the missionaries had brought with them the European 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 uncompromising attitudes started to change gradually. 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 of the educated Christians came to conclude that not everything in the pagan past was sinful and, correspondingly, not all Western habits were worth adopting. So, when a new modern national identity was formed, 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. Chieftaincy has had a central place in this conception of culture and when it is defended against 'idolatry' accusations from the Christian quarters, its assumed traditionality and 'Ghanaianess' are emphasized. A press

report summarizing a chief's speech delivered in an installation ceremony exemplifies this aptly:

> The *Nifahene* of Santrokofi Traditional area, Nana Saku Brimpong, has advised Ghanaians not to misconstrue traditional practices to mean worshipping of idols or evil practices, because every community was built upon strong traditions, with values that made it to grow to appreciable levels and made it possible for members of the various communities to live in peace with one another. […] He said it had become a major problem in many communities in the 21st Century in Ghana, that many of the youth do not see the need to learn and understand the importance of traditional practices in their area, and regard them as evil, which, the Chief described as very unfortunate, since their behaviour towards traditional practices would affect their development. Nana Saku Brimpong noted that the situation, where they looked down upon traditions should be of much concern to all well-meaning Ghanaians, particularly, as the youth have adopted foreign cultures, which are alien to Ghanaian cultural practices. (GhanaWeb 2016)

Although having its historical origins in missionary Christianity, the endorsement of national culture has become a responsibility of state institutions in the post-colonial period (Coe 2005: 52). Hence, it is now understood to be mostly a secular state project. The notion of chieftaincy as a cultural institution has been promoted by successive Ghanaian governments, for whom it has also been a way of keeping the chiefs out of politics (see Kallinen 2016: 115–118). On these occasions, the chiefs' ritual duties are seldom mentioned, and hardly ever

discussed in any detail, or they are redefined as fixtures in 'cultural festivals' which makes them sound harmless both religiously and politically (see, e.g., Adrover 2013).

Many Christian churches have embraced the 'cultural definition' of chieftaincy, and even started to appropriate it in their efforts to 'Africanize' Christianity. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church has reapplied chiefly titles, 'praise poems', and regalia to God, Christ, and church functionaries (Obeng 1996: 129–130). However, such appropriations are not possible for all Ghanaian Christians. Particularly, the Pentecostal-charismatics see the value of culture very differently. As noted earlier, from their perspective, connections to ritual performances bring people under the influence of evil spirits. According to this logic, contemporary Ghanaian Christians who have been able to make 'idolatry' a thing of the past should not continue promoting it under the deceptive banner of culture, because they will all the same become 'cursed', that is, punished by God for that (see Meyer 1998: 323–324). Consequently, bracketing off culture from religion is not an antidote that works against Pentecostal criticisms of chieftaincy.

'I DON'T SEE ANYTHING SATANIC IN IT'

Another important argument put forward by chiefs in their public speeches is that many chiefs are genuine practicing Christians (see, e.g., News Ghana 2012), and the chieftaincy institution is in fact supported by the Bible. This is done both metaphorically and metonymically. In the first instance, the Ghanaian chiefs are presented as modern-day equivalents of the biblical kings, such as David or Solomon. Here chiefs are seen as persons committed to the service of their communities, and as Christians

they turn to God for guidance and blessings. This viewpoint is exemplified by a press report of a chief's address to a Presbyterian congregation:

> The *Kyidomhene* of Aburi in the Akuapem South District of the Eastern Region has debunked the notion that Chiefs are pagans and, therefore, engage in idol worship. According to Nana Opare Kwarfo this outmoded mentality should be consigned to the dustbin of history because the chieftaincy institution was now replete with traditional rulers who worshipped God other than idols. […] The *Kyidomhene* quoted from Psalm 138:4–8 and said David was a prominent King in the days of the Israelites who God used mightily and wrote that Kings and chiefs would be shaped by his experiences and examples, to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ and worship the Almighty God. (The Spectator 2021)

Like in many other Christian discourses in this case, too, analogical connections are made between what is perceived as the biblical past and what is encountered in contemporary society. Thus, the Bible is approached as a model for the present (see Haynes 2020: 58–59). The relationship between King David and God is presented as paradigmatic for the relationship between a Christian chief and God (cf. Valeri 1991: 157–161). This resembles the ways in which chiefs talk about their relations with their current overlords, allies, and subordinates by using past relationships between their ancestors as blueprints for the present-day state of affairs (see Kallinen 2004: 97–134). The difference is that in ancestral metaphors the chiefs are viewed as reincarnations of their predecessors, whereas biblical metaphors point to similarity between past and present relationships, which

are nonetheless understood to be qualitatively different.

In other instances, a metonymical link is established between the biblical past and contemporary institutions. During my fieldwork I was able to discuss these matters with an elderly paramount chief, who was a Christian. He was, however, a member of the Anglican church and in no way did he fit the bill of a born-again believer. He was nevertheless very much aware of the Pentecostal criticisms of chieftaincy and was keen to challenge them. Initially, when his lineage elders had suggested that he should inherit the throne from his uncle he had not been very enthusiastic about the idea. However, his reluctance had had nothing to do with Christianity. It was rather that during the 1960s he had been a university student in Britain and exposed to leftist political ideas. As a socialist he had felt awkward about accepting an aristocratic title. Still, in the end, he had come to the conclusion that he had no real choice in the matter as it was an obligation he should fulfil. Even though it was his politics, not religion, that had made him doubtful about chieftaincy, he was strongly opposed to any views claiming that there was something un-Christian about being a chief. For instance, when he discussed the rituals that he was required to perform, he created linkages between their history and that of Christianity. When talking about the sacrifices he offered to the gods and ancestors during an annual harvest festival, he pointed out that 'it is interesting to know that some of our rituals date back to those of the ancient Israelites. They also sacrificed food after the harvest. It is just that the Israelites have stopped doing that, but we still do it.' To this he also added that the rituals were all about securing the fertility of the farmland and therefore it was hard for him to understand how anybody could object to them. He concluded his thoughts by

stating: 'I don't see anything satanic in it'.

Interestingly, what is suggested by my interlocutor, even if indirectly, is that Christianity and traditional chieftaincy have common historical roots in ancient Judaism. According to him, the contemporary rituals are not analogous to the rituals of the ancient Israelites—they are not merely similar with them—they rather are the same rituals. Even though he does not present a 'syntagmatic' chain of events, which would demonstrate how the past and present are exactly connected (see Valeri 1991: 157–158), the existence of such appears to be the underlying assumption. These ideas may have been influenced by certain intellectual strands in missionary Christianity, which sought to trace the historical roots of Akan religion back to ancient Israel, thus proposing that the principles of the traditional religion could be understood as an 'other Old Testament' anticipating the coming of Christianity (see Debrunner 1967: 6–7), or even some arcane historical accounts, which sought to identify the Akan peoples as a 'lost tribe of Israel' (see McCaskie 2009). From this point of view, there would be no need to criticize or abandon ancestral rituals as idolatrous since they are seen to spring from the same historical source as the Decalogue itself.

CHRIST OVER ANCESTORS

Earlier in the text I implied that 'a complete break with the past' is not a possibility for Christian chiefs, since, as traditional office-holders, they embody the dynastic continuity of the communities they preside over. Therefore, they seek to reconcile chieftaincy with Christianity by discursively creating metaphorical and/or metonymical links between the two. Disconnecting chieftaincy from the ancestral past and its rituals is not

something that the people I have spoken with considered viable. For example, I once asked a member of a royal lineage, who belonged to a Pentecostal church, whether he would like to become a chief if he did not have to perform sacrifices to the ancestors. He thought about it for a moment and then replied: 'It wouldn't be chieftaincy anymore. It would be something new, something else'.[10]

However, certain current developments seem to suggest that things might be changing in this regard. Namely, in recent years nation-wide and local organizations, such as the 'Association of Christian Chiefs and Queen Mothers' and 'Fellowship of Christian Chiefs and Queens', have been formed. For instance, the latter defines itself as 'a registered religious body that aims at encouraging traditional rulers and their functionaries to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and personal saviour and consequently influence their traditional roles with Christian values and principles' (Kumi-Amoah 2019: 257). What is far more radical, is that such organizations promote a view according to which chieftaincy receives its spiritual authority from Christ and not ancestors. Similarly, the goal of the activities is reaching eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, rather than joining the ranks of the venerated forefathers. The scriptural foundations of these ideas emphasize the authority of God as the ultimate 'king-maker' (Daniel 2: 21) and warn against consulting the spirits of the dead (Isaiah 8: 19) (ibid.: 262–266). Obviously, such chiefs do not perform the traditional rituals attached to their offices, which are in some cases substituted by prayers, hymn singing, or even speaking in tongues (Prempeh 2022: 9).

Notions of this kind appear to be cultivated in Ghana especially by those traditional leaders who identify as born-again believers. In the light of my past field experiences, such views seem quite radical, and hence I suspect that this

is a relatively new phenomenon. In this kind of thinking the 'complete break' has been achieved but, moreover, a certain kind of reconnection has been established. In his review of Meyer's work, Matthew Engelke (2010) points out that the types of Christian conversion that emphasize a break with the past are not only about the renunciation of one's own traditions, but also often about aligning oneself in relation to an enduring and imagined Christian history. Engelke refers to this with the term 'realignments of rupture', which basically refers to arrangements, where one kind of tradition is erased while another embraced. In the Ghanaian case, the born-again chiefs accomplish this by making references to a putative biblical foundation of their offices and point to Christ as the source of their spiritual backing.

CONCLUSIONS

Ethical rules of world religions, such as the First/Second Commandment, transcend particularity and their strength is based on an impression that they are applicable everywhere. However, this requires mediation work that makes the rules transportable and gives them potential to be re-contextualized in different places. Above I have described how a relatively abstract religious rule has emerged from its 'proto-Judaic' past and travelled from one place to another through the millennia, reaching Ghana in its Christian form. After its arrival it has been applied in evaluating and suppressing all sorts of indigenous religious beliefs and practices by labelling them idolatrous. Especially with the rise of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, traditional chieftaincy has been portrayed in a negative light as idolatry in Christian discourses. These accusations have been challenged by referring to chieftaincy as a part of Ghanaian culture, and therefore harmless or neutral from

the religious point of view. Some Christian chiefs have also responded to these indictments either by emphasizing traditional chieftaincy's congruence with Christian past, while others have decided to abandon the traditional past and sought to define chieftaincy anew on Christian terms.

I have suggested that the debates about whether Christians can be chiefs or not can be understood as a part of the interpretation and recontextualization of the biblical rule. They are negotiations about what a general rule means in this particular context. As is evident, this puts traditional institutions, like chieftaincy, through complex reflective revaluations and redefinitions among Christians and chiefs themselves. At the same time, it also appears to be a test of viability for the rule itself or its interpretations. If an 'external' rule is perceived to question something that has hitherto been considered a cornerstone of the social order, then it raises questions about whether following the rule is even possible. This further accentuates the radical religious transformation that the Ghanaian society has experienced in its recent history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1 Terms, such as traditional chieftaincy, traditional culture, and traditional rituals, are used in the text primarily as native categories. They are terms used by Ghanaians themselves, when speaking English. As will become evident below, it is in no way suggested that the phenomena these terms describe would somehow represent a 'pre-modern' past.

2 The early conflicts between chiefs and Christian converts have been discussed primarily by historians, political scientists, and anthropologists (see, e.g., Tordoff 1965; Dunn & Robertson 1973; Kallinen 2016). The contemporary situation has also attracted the interest of legal and religion scholars (see, e.g., Atiemo 2006; Goshadze 2019; Ubink 2007).

3 In Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions, the 'idol prohibition' does not constitute a separate command from the prohibition of worshipping other gods, while in Calvinistic tradition it is the second commandment. The number of commandments is kept at ten by splitting or combining the verse of Exodus which constitutes the ninth and tenth commandments (Nebe 2011: 54).

4 Having said that, it is important to add that the political context of the early conflicts was quite different. In the colonial era indirect rule system, Christian converts were subjects to their 'native authorities' and protested against obligatory participation in traditional rituals. Consequently, the colonial administrators had to create a formal separation between secular obligations, mandatory to all, and religious obligations that did not concern Christians (Kallinen 2014). Today chiefs no longer function as an arm of state administration and the relationship between the chiefs and their subjects is not politically controlled in the same way as it was during the colonial period.

5 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% of the total population. The Akan language and its dialects are classified under the Tano language family, including Asante Twi, Fante, and Akuapem, which also have their own distinctive written forms.

6 The treatment is based on online research and long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ghana. Fieldwork took place in Kumasi, Ashanti Region, in 2000–2001 and in Nkoranza, present-day Bono East Region, in 2005–2006. It was conducted with chiefs, traditional priests, and leaders and members of local Christian communities.

7 For instance, Ernestina Afriyie interviewed over fifty Christian residents of the kingdom of Akuapem in southern Ghana who had reservations about participating in their annual harvest festival. The respondents identified the 'feeding of the gods' during the festival as 'idol worship', and almost all of them cited Exodus 20: 3–4 in this instance (Afriyie 2020: 9–10).

8 In Christaller's dictionary *ohoni* is defined as 'a figure made of clay or wood, meant to represent a sick person and put at the outskirt of the town for the spirit supposed to be troubling the person; *image*, *statue*; *idol*' (Christaller 1881: 189). As far as I can see, this has nothing to do with the rituals performed by chiefs.

9 Apparently, in some translations of other tracts of the Bible the word *ɔbosom* (pl. *abosom*), 'nature spirit', is used to translate the term 'idol'. This can, of course, make some Bible readers think that this is also the meaning of the idols mentioned in the Ten Commandments (Afriyie 2020: 14–17).

10 Some Christian chiefs have tried to resolve this issue by delegating their ritual duties to their attendants. This has been accepted by some churches with certain reservations. For others this arrangement is unacceptable because it is understood that the chief still supports, or at least condones, the rituals even though he does not perform them personally (see Gilbert 1995: 366–367). From the point of view of the traditionalists, chiefs who do not undergo the traditional installation ceremonies in full and avoid performing their ritual duties are left 'spiritually naked', which makes their rule incomplete (Prempeh 2022: 9).

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