

**DANCING BLACK CHRISTIANITY:  
Revealing African American and Ghanaian Cultural Identity through  
Movement in Christian Worship**

Sydney L. Mosley

Senior Thesis  
Department of Dance  
Spring 2007  
Thesis director: L. Garafola  
© Sydney L. Mosley

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements..... iii

Introduction..... 1

    Methodology..... 6

Accra, Ghana..... 8

*Contextualizing African Worship*

        Mainline Churches: Presbyterian, Evangelical Presbyterian..... 20

        African Independent Church: Apostles Revelation Society..... 27

*A New Cultural Future: Innovative Ghanaian Worship and Global Christianity*

        Pentecostal Church: Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Students Association..... 30

        Charismatic Church: Action Chapel, Royal House Chapel..... 34

        Conclusions..... 39

Baltimore, Maryland..... 44

*Conventional Mainline Churches: Limited Movement in Worship and Dwindling  
Congregations*

        Baptist: First Baptist Church..... 50

        Methodist: Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church, John Wesley United  
        Methodist Church..... 55

*Dancing Congregations and Social Activism*

        African Methodist Episcopal Church: Bethel A.M.E. Church..... 61

        Charismatic Church: Empowerment Temple A.M.E. Church..... 69

        Conclusions..... 72

Movement for Worship in Accra and Baltimore: Cultural Comparisons, Continuities and  
Disparities..... 77

    Individualized Worship Experiences..... 78

    Globalization, Cultural Continuity and Cross-cultural Comparisons..... 79

Conclusion..... 85

Bibliography..... 86

Informants..... 90

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the culmination of research and writing conducted over two years. In addition to the work completed with guidance from Professor Lynn Garafola and Professor Kim Hall, parts of this work were developed under Professor Brian Larkin's Junior Colloquium in African Popular Culture in the fall of 2005; Professor Olayemi Tinuoye and Gavin Webb of the School of International Training in Ghana; and Dr. A. A. Agordoh of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon campus in the Spring of 2006. In addition, research for this project was supported by the Lucyle Hook Travel Grant.

Many thanks to my fellow senior Africana Studies majors and my fellow dance major, Johanna Kirk, for being wonderful peer editors.

Even more thanks to those whose kindness, support, and guidance made this project possible: Mr. Seth Newman and the Christian Fellowship of Ghana at the Immanuel Presbyterian Church of Madina, Kofi Gademeh and the United Young Dancers of the Royal House Chapel International, Gifty Laryea and the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Jill Flanders Crosby, Steven Ajayku, Ava Fields and the Ava Fields Dance Ministry, Crystal Mosley, Professor Paul Scolieri, Professor Lynn Garafola, and Professor Kim Hall. Thank You.

## INTRODUCTION

Since childhood, dance has been intimately connected with my faith. I was raised in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. In this tradition, I grew up as a witness to “catching the Holy Spirit” and “shouting,” a moment when people are moved to a vocal or physical expression of their spirituality, most often characterized by jumping up and down, sometimes uncontrollably. At age seven, when my education began under the auspices of my church’s school, I brought knowledge from my Saturday ballet classes to the creation of dances for school concerts that were always infused with a profession that “Jesus is Lord” and homage to an African-American and African heritage. Thus, performing dance to convey both an expression of my Christian faith and my African-American culture became the essence of my dancing, though I was unconscious of this at such a young age.

While Christianity has been with African-Americans in the United States for so long that it has become a “native” faith, the foreign imposition of Christianity is still fresh in other countries, such as Ghana. This means that over the past few centuries, African-Americans have had the opportunity to create art, music, movement, and dramatic styles of their own to honor and worship God. But in Ghana, images and methods of praise still hold onto their British colonial and missionary beginnings. For instance, a blond-haired, blue-eyed, bearded white male college student who was traveling with me in Ghana was often mistaken for Jesus. It is only recently that worship in Ghanaian Christian churches has become “African,” and music and dance, which is an undeniable part of the Ghanaian culture and the way to worship in traditional culture, has been integrated into the worship of Jesus Christ.

The two communities in which this study takes place, Accra and Baltimore, are urban coastal communities with a dominant cultural identity; in Baltimore this is determined by racial

experience (African-American) and in Accra by ethnic (Akan, Ga, and Ewe) and national experience (Ghanaian). The Akan are the largest of the major ethnic groups in Ghana. In the Greater Accra region where this study focuses, the Akan, Ewe, and Ga are represented; however, the Akan culture and their language, Twi especially, dominates the general culture and will be a focus. This project examines a full spectrum of church denominations, their histories to the extent of their methods of worship but more importantly their contemporary modes of worship, in order to understand the relationship between movement and identity. Although the “Black Church” is often referred to as a single entity, in actuality it includes multiple experiences; thus it is important to analyze church worship styles across different denominations and countries to have a more comprehensive understanding of how and why black people worship the way that they do. This study examines three categories of churches: well established protestant denominations known as mainline churches, churches created by members of the black community for the black community, and Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.

Baltimore, Maryland, is a city whose population is dominated by blacks and arguably by a specifically African-American cultural experience. According to the United States Census Bureau in 2005, sixty-five point two percent of the city’s population identified themselves as black or African American.<sup>1</sup> Harold McDougall in *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community* analyzes Baltimore’s black demographics and claims the city is marked by a strong, vibrant, “vernacular,” black culture, drawing on Ivan Illich’s theory of the vernacular.<sup>2</sup> Illich defines vernacular as the culture native to a place, including the home and community institutions that form the culture.<sup>3</sup> Among the most prominent of these community institutions is

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Baltimore, Maryland,” <http://factfinder.census.gov> (8 November 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Harold McDougall, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the church. Some of the first churches established in the United States for African-American worship are located in Baltimore. These congregations date to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and have endured through the present day.

Ghana, often referred to as the “Gateway to Africa,” is a predominately Christian country with more than sixty percent of its population participating in mostly Protestant denominations.<sup>4</sup> An English-speaking, West African country known for its hospitable people and rich cultural heritages, African Americans commonly make this the first stop on their first visit to Africa. The country’s Christian fervor is evident the moment one steps off the plane, from pastors ministering on tro-tro’s, the public buses,<sup>5</sup> to signboards over every shop on a street that communicates some Christian message such as “Thank You Jesus Hairbraiding,” or “Alleluia Cellphones.” Given that Christianity is the crux of the culture of these two communities, through the examination of different modes of movement used in their worship services I hope to speak to the cultural identities of these groups of people, connected by a history of slavery, and new bonds and exchanges across cultures.

This project finds itself at the cross-roads of several areas of study, mainly dance, religion, anthropology, and African Diaspora studies. While there are no texts that simultaneously treat all of these topics, there are several sources that provide a theoretical base to work from and speak to various significant aspects of the topic.

Dance itself is the most pertinent primary resource, and Jane Desmond, in her article “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” provides the tools and questions necessary for a social and cultural analysis of movement. Melville Herskovits in his seminal

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 90.

<sup>5</sup> Tro-tro, short for “throw and throw,” is a small bus normally seating 16-20 passengers. The buses are privately owned and operated by a driver and a “mate” who collects a fare from passengers. They are one of the main modes of public transportation throughout the country especially in urban areas.

1941 work, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, first addresses the issue of cultural analysis in terms of the African Diaspora experience. Herskovits argues for the retention of Africanisms found in African-American cultural experiences throughout the Americas, and discusses at length different forms of acculturation; yet, he fails to give attention to the formation and validity of African-American culture in its own right, as it has developed a trajectory parallel to but distinguished from African culture in a post-slavery and post-colonial era. Sidney Mintz and Richard Price address this gap in knowledge in their work, *Birth of African-American Culture*. In Mintz and Price's study, they argue against a simplistic and essentialist tracing of African-American practices directly correlating to African origins and instead emphasize the distinctiveness of African American cultures from African cultural practices and institutions.

Considering the significant shift from the practice of indigenous religions to Christianity in Africa, cultural changes and effects must be examined. Karen Barber's article "Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa" addresses the significant change in religion from participant to spectator worship. However, Barber does not take into account acculturation, specifically the ways in which the new spectator-audience relationship implemented by the church has been molded into a participatory context. Byang Kato in his *Biblical Christianity in Africa* gives acculturation a specific name and purpose. He makes a call to Africans to "contextualize" their Christian worship. He chooses this word over "indigenize" because it conveys the idea of "making concepts or ideas relevant in a given situation."<sup>6</sup> Pertinent to this study, "contextualization" means that Ghana has to have music and dance in the church because this is the culture of the context.

---

<sup>6</sup> Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: Theological Perspectives in Africa* (Achimoto, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1985), 23.

While modes of movement and music specific to African-American Christian worship are often exaggerated or parodied in the popular media, few scholars focus on what these worship customs are and how and why they exist, especially in relation to Africa in the past and present. The chief works that speak to the Christian conversion of African-Americans and the role of dance in their new religious practices are *African American Christian Worship* by Melva Wilson Costen, *Come Shouting to Zion* by Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, and “Christian Conversion and Dance” by Sterling Stuckey. Frey and Wood also address the establishment of the church as an important social institution in the American South. Harold McDougall’s *Black Baltimore* talks specifically about the significance of the church to the black community in Baltimore.

Much scholarship exists on the centrality of dance to African traditional religion, but virtually none of that scholarship examines the use of dance for worship among African Christians. Robert Fisher’s *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana* addresses traditional religious music and dance in Ghana; and while work by A. A. Agordoh addresses the history of music in the Ghanaian Christian worship, it does not address dance. The works of Marilyn Daniel and J.G. Davies addresses dance in Christianity, specifically liturgical dance, giving a historical and practical perspective in non-race specific terms. Finally, Paul Gifford’s book, *Ghana’s New Christianity* addresses the importance of the church in the contemporary Ghanaian context and Christianity as a central social institution of the people.

While I do not claim that this project is the first of its kind, it is significantly different from existing scholarship because the examination of dance within the churches of these black communities is primary. It identifies exactly what those movements are, what context they occur in, and how they came about. Furthermore, this project compares and contrasts how the people



performing this movement perceive it and its impact with my own observation of its significance to the community they are in and to the Diaspora community at large. I examine dance as a performance of cultural identity in terms of religious practice and socio-political context in relation to the broader circulation and transmission of cultural forms in the African Diaspora. Through this study I address common trends across these divergent communities that demonstrate the impetus for the way in which black congregations worship. Even more, through the text of the moving body, I demonstrate intimate connections with social identity, thus revealing conscious or unconscious patterns of cultural transmissions in the African Diaspora.

### *Methodology*

An anthropological approach guides the research methods for this project, including interviews, participant observation, and non-participant observation. While in Accra, Ghana, I worked in three different fields: churches, the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana, Legon, and church choreography groups. I examined the mainline churches that have their roots in pre-colonial missions; the African Independent/Indigenous Churches (AIC), established in Africa by Africans; and the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches that replicate and have been significantly influenced by contemporary Western religious trends, particularly from the United States. I attended Sunday services, informally interviewed members and formally interviewed the director of music at the African Independent Church on the use of music and dance in the worship service and about my observations during the service. I took lessons in traditional dance daily for three weeks with members of the Ghana Dance Ensemble to enrich my knowledge of Ghanaian dance. I interviewed my dance teachers on the history and significance of the dances. I observed the rehearsals of two choreography groups and interviewed

members and each director. Lastly, I choreographed a dance to contribute to the repertoire of each group.

I duplicated this methodology as much as possible in Baltimore by examining several mainline denominations, as well as those with a Charismatic style of worship. In addition to observing worship services and interviewing members, music directors and other church officials, I observed performances of dance ministries and interviewed the directors, choreographers and members.

Questions raised in the observation and interview part of the project include: What kind of movement is used? To what extent is movement choreographed or improvised within a particular setting? What is the process of dance composition within the context of churches? How does that relate to overall use of dance for worship? What are the sociological, economic, and ethnographic reasons for particular types of movement in particular churches? By asking these types of questions I explore how social identities are codified in performance styles. Further, as author Jane Desmond proposes, I analyze “how the use of the body in dance is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies, or exceeds norms of non-dance bodily expression with specific historical context,”<sup>7</sup> in this case the historical context of slavery and colonialism under which these black churches were established, and their contemporary legacy.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latino/a America*, eds. Celeste Delgado and Jose Muñoz. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 33.

## ACCRA, GHANA

Dance is a vital, continually changing function of religious practice over the course of Ghanaian history. During the pre-colonial era, dance was integral to the religious culture of major ethnic groups in Ghana. Yet, the Christianizing mission of the British during the nineteenth-century age of colonialism disassociated dance from religious practice. Those who continued to dance their traditional religion were cast as fetish and demon worshippers by missionaries. When Kwame Nkrumah led Ghana into its independence in the late 1950s, he recuperated traditional dances as a source of nationalist pride. These dances, both sacred and secular, gathered from the diverse ethnic populations of the country, became the repertoire of Ghana Dance Ensemble, the national dance company. This performance group, among others, preserves traditional dances in a secular realm unrelated to both traditional ethnic religious practices and the dominant contemporary Christian religious practices. Moreover, today's pervasive modern Christian culture reclaims dance into its religious worship. Traditional dance, however, is not always the source of movement, and even when it is, sacred traditional dances remain taboo in the church. Thus, the trajectory of dance in its relationship to religious worship has left sacred traditional dances in the secular realm of the popular culture, performed in culture shows or villages. At the same time, however, this trajectory has left the function of dance in Ghanaian Christian churches dynamically varied, simultaneously integrating Christianity with past religious culture while reconciling it with contemporary culture.

Dance is an intrinsic part of traditional Akan culture, as a mode of religious worship and social practices. The first chapter of Robert Fisher's book, *West African Religious Traditions*, argues:

Africans were the first human beings to dance and reflect on their humanity in terms of a world beyond the physical, the spiritual order of gods and ancestors.

Religion and culture are therefore inseparable from the beginning.<sup>8</sup>

Fisher states that “religion is life” for Akan society.<sup>9</sup> Thus dance, as a mode of religious expression, is a fundamental manifestation of culture. Author Doris Green further describes the inseparability of dance and culture when she cites Keita Fodeba’s idea that dance is “a spontaneous emanation of the people.”<sup>10</sup> For the Akan, movement celebrates both the ordinary and the significant events of daily life. Dance serves a dual role for them: it is a means of religious expression that connects the physical and metaphysical realms and a social means of communication between members of the community.<sup>11</sup> For religious worship and festivals, dance is the mode through which Akan people commune with and worship ancestral and tutelary spirits.<sup>12</sup> The social function of these religious dances is two-part. First, they generate a systematic control over all forces of good and evil for harmony between the human and spirit worlds. Second, a priest’s possession trance achieved through dance creates an opportunity to address personal issues and needs, as well as those of the community with the spirits.<sup>13</sup> As Fisher states:

The purpose of communal dancing, drumming, singing...and the whole cult of the ancestors is to ward off death as long as possible, to enjoy good health,

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert B. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Fisher, *West African*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Doris Green, “Traditional Dance in Africa,” in *African Dance An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry* (Trenton: African World Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, *West African*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, *West African*, 17-22.

<sup>13</sup> Fisher, *West African*, 17-19.

and to find happiness in this life on earth through the prevention or avoidance of any evil force a person or a community should encounter.<sup>14</sup>

Akan spirituality and livelihood is fundamentally expressed through corporeal practices, and while no culture is ever stagnant, it is through the continual practice of traditional Akan religion that pre-colonial societal customs live.

Yet British colonization of the Gold Coast, as Ghana was known in the colonial period, eradicated dance from religious worship as missionaries baptized the indigenous people into Christianity. Although there were many attempts to bring Christianity to the area as early as the fifteenth century, the first missions did not take hold until the founding of the Basel Mission in 1828. By 1914, virtually all Christian denominations were established.<sup>15</sup> The British Christianizing mission instituted a binary system in which all that was holy, including the style of worship, was European, while missionaries harshly denounced indigenous drumming, dancing, and singing so integrally associated with traditional Akan religious worship. For them, anything not Christian was evil.<sup>16</sup> Dance as a mode of worship was specifically represented as evil because European Christians imported their negative views of the body along with their ideas of a civil and modern society. To Europeans, there was a dichotomy between the human flesh and soul, and in order to keep the soul pure one must control the practices of the body.<sup>17</sup> According to A.M. Opoku, a founding director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, Christian influences during colonialism made it unacceptable for Ghanaians to dance the dances of religious and social

---

<sup>14</sup> Fisher, *West African*, 102.

<sup>15</sup> A. A. Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship: A Comparative Study of the Musical Traditions of the Older Mission Churches and the New Churches in Ghana* (Ph.D. Thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, 1997), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi, "In Contest: The Dynamics of African Religious Dances," in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Welsh Asante, Kariamu (Trenton: African World Press, 1996), 192-193.

<sup>17</sup> Ajayi, "In Contest," 194-195.

customs.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, by suppressing dance as a means of religious expression, Europeans subjugated Africans because dance, the essence of African religious and social customs, was cast as inferior to European customs. Christian conversion brought about disenchantment with traditional dance. Ghanaians could not dance the *fontomfrom* and *adowa*, yet they danced the European Maypole dance in a secular setting.<sup>19</sup> By denying Africans the opportunity to dance their own dances during Colonialism, Europeans denied the culture that lives inside the dance. Thus, over time a new popular religious culture evolved, that replaced indigenous practices.

Forced by the British out of the realm of spirituality, traditional dance came to exist in the realms of education, performance, and entertainment. It also became a base for the evolution of other popular dances. Robert Nicholls states, “In the course of social evolution, a modernizing, urbanizing people need to see the reflections of their emerging new identity mirrored in their popular arts.”<sup>20</sup> Nicholls recognizes that culture is not stagnant, and thus popular artistic expressions must reflect the elements of a modernizing culture. With the rapid rise in Christian culture during the British occupation, traditional dance and music were secularized, and a new religious culture emerged. In this new culture, new media displaced dance and other performing arts as means of worship while steering Ghanaians away from the performing arts in a traditional religious sense. Thus, the relationship of traditional dance to newer generations of Ghanaians significantly changed. Traditional dance transformed from a participatory religious culture to spectator entertainment completely separate from religious culture.

Because traditional dance has nothing to do with the religious life of most urban Ghanaians, a new audience hungry for movement emerged in the realm of religious worship.

---

<sup>18</sup> A.M. Opoku, *African Dances: A Ghanaian Profile* (Legon: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1965).

<sup>19</sup> Opoku, *African Dances*.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Nicholls, “African Dance: Transition and Continuity,” in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Kariamu Welsh Asante (Trenton: African World Press, 1996), 50.

Karin Barber points out that “ways of being an audience are made possible only by existing ways of being in society.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, participating in a religious dance ritual is not possible if this is not the main mode of religious worship. In contrast, new modes of worship consist of going to church to *watch* the choir sing and play music, and to *sit* listening to the preacher’s sermon. Instead of actively participating in traditional spirit worship through the expressive gestures of a dance involving the entire group, Ghanaian Christians became a European-style spectator public; individuals were among an indefinitely large and undifferentiated audience observing the performance of a few.<sup>22</sup> A line divided audience and participant. Religious worship and dance were no longer synonymous. Instead, traditional dance became something to be viewed and learned.

The British relinquished political control of Ghana in 1957 to Kwame Nkrumah who funded the recuperation of sacred and secular traditional dance to provide a source of nationalist pride in the face of this new independence.<sup>23</sup> At the same time he sought to make traditional expressive forms the source of new creative developments in Ghana and thus sponsored a National Theater Movement. One of the first national cultural preservation initiatives, the purpose of this movement was to make educated people aware of traditional artistic forms by making the arts a part of classroom learning. Nkrumah believed that the cultural emancipation of Ghana should be linked to the traditional past.<sup>24</sup> Nkrumah’s government consequently endowed a dance program at the University of Ghana, Legon, at the Institute of African Studies’ School of Performing Arts.<sup>25</sup> Attached to the University dance program was the national dance company, Ghana Dance Ensemble, whose first members were the first students to complete the University

---

<sup>21</sup> Karen Barber, “Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa,” *Africa* 67.3 (1997), 348.

<sup>22</sup> Barber, “Preliminary Notes,” 348.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 377.

<sup>24</sup> W. Ofotsu Adinku, *African Dance Education in Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Adinku, *African Dance Education*, 1.

program in 1965. Professors J.H. Nketia and A.M. Opoku were co-directors of the dance curriculum. Opoku also directed the dance company.

In the 1960s, when Opoku and Nketia organized Ghanaian dance on behalf of the government, they were conscientious of the changing role of dance in the context of Ghanaian society. At that time, Opoku made it the ensemble's mission to perform new works based upon learned movement techniques. When the dancers' trained, they went to rural areas of Ghana to learn the traditional dances in context, and understand the connection of dance to people's lives.<sup>26</sup> This government-funded fieldwork illustrates how distant urban Ghanaians were from their historical culture. The sacred and secular dances they were learning as a nationalist education project were completely outside their quotidian activities and religious practices. As a result of its fieldwork, the Ghana Dance Ensemble dances neo-traditional work, new dances conceived for theatrical presentation that preserve the roots of traditional Ghanaian dances. In neo-traditional presentations of Ghanaian dance, Opoku states that the work presented by the dancers at the University of Ghana is fully conscious of the evolution in society. Because the spectators are not participants, he rethinks ways to present traditional dances and movements.

In this new realm where traditional dances are learned as an educational project and performed in a theater space, dance becomes an aesthetic activity. Removal of the traditional dance from its context not only secularizes it and brings it a new audience, but also affects how the movement is viewed and appreciated. At the School of Performing Arts, movement and movement ideas are extracted from the rural communities to create new choreography and presentations of the movement. In the traditional setting dance is synonymous with life, and it is through dancing that members participate in the social, religious, and even political and economic life of the community. Community members perceive and understand dances in this

---

<sup>26</sup> Adinku, *African Dance Education*, 6.



context. In the classroom and theater setting, however, perceptions of movement depend on objective analysis in which the dance is divorced from its indigenous context and appreciated as an aesthetic object. In a contextual analysis, one considers the societal links to the movement in assessing the meaning of the work.<sup>27</sup> Both modes of assessing the movement validate the dance in a manner closer to a European approach to art appreciation. Extracting the social context from the movement while and presenting it in a new environment to a new audience, means that the movement will be appreciated in a different fashion than if it were being performed in the rural setting.

Traditional dances have also formed the basis for contemporary popular dances that typically occur in nightclubs, bars, stadium shows, and festivals. One of the most notable of these dances is Highlife. The origins of Highlife dancing are in the Akan funeral dance, *adowa*, combined with British ballroom dancing.<sup>28</sup> The movement is accompanied by Highlife music, an extremely popular syncretic form both in Ghana and internationally. The music fuses Western instruments, African beats, and the local vernacular, syncretic, or English languages. Highlife peaked in the 1950s and 1960s. Since then, Reggae, Hip Hop, and Hiplife, all imported to some extent from the West, have been integrated into an African style of Ghanaian music and dance.<sup>29</sup> Thus, traditional culture lives through the acculturation of music and dance forms with Ghanaian conventions. These popular secular forms illustrate the evolution of society, and although specific dances are divorced from their original context, the movement itself continues to exist as a vital expressive form. Hiplife may be the newest incarnation of *adowa*, but *adowa* endures, merely adapted to a more contemporary context.

---

<sup>27</sup> Adinku, *African Dance Education*, 32-33.

<sup>28</sup> Tracy D. Snipe, "African Dance: Bridges to Humanity," in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Kariamuwelsh Asante, (Trenton: African World Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>29</sup> Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm, *Culture and Customs of Ghana* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 185-188.

Today, Christianity is a pervasive presence in Ghanaian culture, and in the past several years it has developed in a way that fully integrates Christian beliefs, idioms of everyday life, and varying styles of worship. Traditional practices continue to dwindle, especially with the rise of Pentecostalism in recent years. In fact, as of 1998, among Ghana's population of nineteen million, only twenty percent claim to adhere to traditional religions. Protestantism in Ghana is both prominent and obtrusive. Some examples of this religious culture include Christian slogans on bumper stickers or windows of cars, taxis, and tro-tro's that say something akin to "Nyame Nyhira Wo" (God Bless). There are also a significant amount of Christian related public television announcements. According to Paul Gifford, the gospel of Jesus Christ has "become a significant expression of Ghanaian culture, not in any fossilized sense but in a contemporary form, in contact with the modern world and the West."<sup>30</sup> Thus, any popular forms of media, entertainment, and art have become a vehicle for Christian worship and evangelism. This includes television, radio, movies, music, and now even dancing.

While codified movement practices associated with traditional religions have been eradicated from Christian religious worship, movement expression is still a part of the general Ghanaian culture. Ghanaians typically equate dance with life, and one cannot simply erase one's motor patterns or cultural behavior. Moreover, in contemporary society, the word dance, meaning formal dance education, it is equated with the traditional dances. While not everyone will attend a university program in order to perfect their craft, all Ghanaians, beginning in childhood, have some exposure to the basics of traditional movement style. Just as many Americans have a concept of what a pirouette is, most Ghanaians can sway their arms back and forth in the fashion of *adowa*. Moreover, Ghanaians love to dance whenever and wherever. For example, on Easter Monday 2006, a d.j. set up huge speakers only a few feet from the ocean at

---

<sup>30</sup> Gifford, *African Christianity*, 90.

Kokrobite Beach, a resort 25 km. west of Accra. Whether people were standing in the ocean, on the beach, or at picnic tables, everyone was dancing to their favorite Hiplife songs.

With dance as such a vibrant part of the popular culture, churches in recent years have begun to reclaim dance into their worship services. Both Robert Fisher and Harvey Cox agree that there has been an acculturation within some churches, allowing people to live a Christian life in a way that relates to African culture. According to Fisher, some churches affirm the local language and cultural idioms through drumming and choir singing in services.<sup>31</sup> Pentecostal followers may cite Psalms to justify their drumming and King David's dance to justify dancing.<sup>32</sup> Dance is a part of Christian worship in the sense that people feel that they can come to church and dance their troubles away instead of going to nightclubs. Ghanaian churches may employ music, dancing, and clapping as a means to enhance the religious experience.<sup>33</sup> Such an approach draws from the "ancient spirit resources" of the past and recasts the future of religious worship.<sup>34</sup> Traditional social dances and music forms are often used, while some churches incorporate movement traditions specific to that denomination. Movement and dancing may also occur at the spur of the moment, in the spirit, while in other cases movement may be altered or arranged for choreography groups. While these movement styles vary widely and the performance of them depends on the congregation, traditional sacred dance is labeled unacceptable for any Christian worship. Ghanaian Christians refer to these sacred dances as "fetish," and shun the idea of bringing them into the church. Thus, traditional sacred dances remain confined to the secular realms of popular urban culture through education and entertainment.

---

<sup>31</sup> Fisher, *West African*, 170-171.

<sup>32</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 248.

<sup>33</sup> Falola and Salm, *Culture and Customs of Ghana* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 188.

<sup>34</sup> Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 258-259.

Integrating movement, a traditional Ghanaian mode of worship, into the structure provided by the Christian church, is an acculturation process that reflects the current state of Ghanaian culture. Thus, it is through the analysis of the types of movement and their context within different church denominations that one can understand the complexities of Ghana's social, economic, political, and cultural life, which at once confronts a rich heritage and negotiates itself as a globalizing society.

#### CONTEXTUALIZING AFRICAN WORSHIP

##### *Mainline Churches: Presbyterian, Evangelical Presbyterian*

The Presbyterian Church and Evangelical Presbyterian Churches are closely related mainline churches. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church was established by the Bremen Mission in Ewe-land, east of the Volta River in 1847.<sup>35</sup> This type of pioneer mission in Ghana espoused the idea that all traditional practices of worship were satanic. As mentioned earlier, when converting Africans into Christianity, they eradicated all elements of traditional worship, especially music and dance. According to Dr. A. A. Agordoh, in traditional worship the key elements are that of prayer, sacrifice, and music, with music being the most effective means of communal expression.<sup>36</sup> Further, movement is an integral and necessary part of communing with the gods; devotees express their response to the music through miming, gesture, choreography, and priestly possession.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, the monotheistic Christianity brought by Europeans did not

---

<sup>35</sup> A. A. Agordoh, *Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana and Her Musical Tradition* (Madina, Accra: Royal Crown Printing Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 34.

require music and movement to be in touch with God, thus rendering the idea of multiple deities and the worship methods to commune with them, unholy.

With this conviction against traditional elements, participatory and expressive worship in Presbyterian and Evangelical Presbyterian churches was limited to the singing of translated European hymns and little or no dancing. According to Richard “Individual” Asare, a 2006 B.F.A. candidate in Dance at Legon, born and raised in the Presbyterian Church, earlier generations of Presbyterian churches had a set liturgy. “They weren’t dancin’ *at all!*” he exclaimed during an interview, shaking his head and waving his arms.<sup>38</sup> According to Dr. Agordoh, the African in these mainline churches was suppressed by “trying to behave like a white man to such an extent that this discomfort can only be contained for some time.”<sup>39</sup>

Of late, this discomfort has been surfacing. Because of the strong ties to European missions, worship services remain inaccessible to many people, especially the illiterate or semi-illiterate, poor peoples, and youth. With newer churches emerging with more accessible and participatory worship styles, Presbyterians and other denominations began to allow for more music and dancing in order to stop the drain of membership from the churches. More specifically, choirs and drama groups were established to perform as a part of regular church service that incorporated traditional styles. In the Evangelical Presbyterian churches, centered in the Volta region,<sup>40</sup> the traditions are particularly Ewe, including *boboobo* and *agbadza*.<sup>41</sup>

In the mainline churches I worshipped with, the dance (or lack thereof) taking place during worship is closely related to the use of music. During my first visit to a Presbyterian

---

<sup>38</sup> Richard “Individual” Asare, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 19 April 2006.

<sup>39</sup> A. A. Agordoh. *Evangelical Presbyterian Church*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> This is the eastern most region of Ghana and it is predominately occupied by the Ewe ethnic group.

<sup>41</sup> These are dance-music forms particular to the Ewe. *Agbadza* is danced at specific occasions such as shrine ceremonies and funerals. *Boboobo* is the most popular social dance-music form among the Ewe in Ghana and Togo.

church I witnessed dancing to gospel Highlife music<sup>42</sup> with the entire congregation simply in motion as the music moved them. This was most distinctly seen during the Offering, when row by row, congregation members left their seats and processed around the church stepping in time and raising their arms in praise.

At the Adenta Evangelical Presbyterian Church, I attended Dr. Agordoh's 10 a.m. Ewe-language service in which music took a decided precedence over dancing; however, the dancing generated a spirited scene. Throughout the service, but before the sermon, many singing groups performed beginning with the Church Choir singing an *a capella* African anthem. Songs of praise followed in which the entire congregation jumped and bounced to the music, waving their handkerchiefs fiercely in the air and pointing their fingers to the sky. During the singing the congregation moved with sincere joy giving expression to their praise. The vibrant clothing, along with the singing and movement made, for a natural and lively way to physically express one's praise to the Lord.

Singing by other groups illuminated the meeting of the European and African influences in church music. Some choirs sing songs from the hymnal accompanied by the keyboard but also used traditional drumming in the background such as *agbadza* and *boboobo*. The singers would stand stiff, straight, and unmoving, even when the drums (at least in my mind) begged them to move. To me, this was a direct manifestation of the European impulse not to move during worship. It also illustrated a Ghanaian contextualization since the choirs incorporated drums into the music.

---

<sup>42</sup> Gospel Highlife uses the established Highlife musical style but employs Christian lyrics. Tracy D. Snipe, "African Dance: Bridges to Humanity," in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Welsh Asante, Kariamu (Trenton: African World Press, 1996), 68.

By and large, both the Presbyterian and the Evangelical Presbyterian churches stick to a prescribed liturgy and order of worship service, and although they have incorporated music and dance into the worship service in a much more substantial way than I can imagine at their establishment in Ghana, movement seemed restricted to designated parts of the service and specific types of music. Moreover, the worshippers of the North Kaneshie Presbyterian and the Adenta Evangelical Presbyterian churches that I visited were middle aged and older. Thus, it is not surprising that movement was limited during the worship service because these are people who were raised in a much stricter church where they only sang European hymns.

In contrast, the Madina Immanuel Presbyterian Church maintains a much larger young adult population and is fortunate to have among their congregation Seth Newman, Chair of the Dance department at the School of Performing Arts, at the University of Ghana, Legon. In 1983, Newman founded and has since directed the Christian Dance Fellowship (CDF). He believes that the use of traditional dances for Christian worship is fundamental. His mission for CDF is to make people see the potential in using traditional movements for dancing in the church. He has realized that it is a strong tool of communication and an effective medium to reach out to people and inform them of the Christian message.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, as a choreographer, he has worked strictly within the realm of traditional movement and drum rhythms. He maintains the traditional rhythms and simply rearranges the movements in order to complement the songs he has chosen for singing. These songs are popular Ghanaian praise and worship songs familiar to many congregations. Often the dances are performed to a medley of songs. Since the songs are the part of these dances that express the religious message, the movement and the drum rhythms are rearranged to fit the songs. The group even tries to maintain traditional dress within reason. (If they are performing in a church,

---

<sup>43</sup> Seth Newman, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 13 April 2006.

even if the traditional dress requires that some part of the body be exposed, men and women alike will be completely covered.)

An example of these Christianized traditional dances is the Ashanti dance, *adowa*. The performers sing the song “Yɛsu wo nkyean na me tena” (Jesus I will sit beside you), and wear the kente cloth. The movements are arranged in an order that best mimes the song lyrics in order to effectively minister to the audience.<sup>44</sup> Steven Ajayku, a longtime member, CDF, talks about the power of the Christianized *adowa*:

We have this *adowa* piece. We used the Presby church hymns to choreograph. So we say “Jesus I will stay with you,”... and when we change into another movement, you can’t stand it! It is so powerful.<sup>45</sup>

Newman, though, is especially careful not to include movements that are inappropriate or might offend a particular people. For instance, among the Akan a lot of hip movement is considered profane, and thus he makes a conscious effort to omit movement using the hips in order to be respectful to particular cultures as well as the ways of the church.<sup>46</sup>

Often, when CDF uses traditional drum rhythms, their movements do not respond to the dictation of the drum; rather, the dancers rely on their memory of the choreographed order of movements and the songs. While song lyrics are the main musical aspects of these Christian traditional dances, dance-dramas are also a part of the CDF repertoire. During Holy Week I had the opportunity to observe a rehearsal of “The Crucifixion” for an Easter weekend performance. In this piece, drums were specifically used as sound effects to emphasize and complement the

---

<sup>44</sup> *Traditional Dances for Worship Among Christians: the Gospel in Dances*. Efua Sutherland Drama Studio, dir. Seth Newman, videotape.

<sup>45</sup> Steven Ajayku, interviewed by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 9 April 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Seth Newman, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 13 April 2006.



action on stage. For instance, as Christ was being nailed to the cross, there was a drumbeat for each action of striking the nail.

I personally saw and felt the effectiveness of Newman's dance style of using traditional movements to mime the lyrics. The dances in fact display considerable wit in how certain movements are used to portray a particular idea. For example, in his version of the *damba*, the dancers perform a horse-riding type of step while singing in Twi, *I've crushed it down/ And then I will jump up on high and then crush it down with my feet*. Steven Ajayku states: "So this is how we do this thing in the church. When we dance and they hear the songs and see the movement, they go perfectly together, they like it so much."<sup>47</sup>

Newman's dances are effective largely because they exploit the factor of familiarity. When a congregation member or random Ghanaian man, woman, or child sees these dances, they are engaged because it is Ghanaian movement and a Ghanaian beat that physically move the dancers, but Christian songs that spiritually move the dancers to communicate and share their love of Christ with the spectators. Even non-Christians are held captive when witnessing these dances. When even these people want to stand all day and watch the dancing, then clearly the dance is doing its job, ministering to the people and winning souls to the Lord:

I have realized the communication through the dance is just *a very effective way* of reaching out to people. And I get all categories of people who would not sit down for you to talk to one minute on anything about Christianity, but who would watch the dance for one and a half hours preaching the same message through the dance... We get even to the people who are very sensitive to the Christian faith, the Muslims. We get to the Muslim communities and dance and they stand and watch and nobody gets offended, and they watch and listen to the message all

---

<sup>47</sup> Steven Ajayku, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 9 April 2006.

through. It has been very exciting to me just using this medium and seeing how effective it is.<sup>48</sup>

The dance ministry at Newman's church is considered unique because of the style of the dances and also because the group travels to churches of all denominations to minister. When performing during another congregation's worship service, they normally use the entire time of the service for their performance. In any church where they are welcomed, after each dance Newman speaks to the congregation: "The comment I normally give is to call their attention to what the message was. Did they hear? Did you see? Did they understand what we say?"<sup>49</sup> In this method of ministering, Newman capitalizes on the performer-spectator binary by engaging Ghanaian congregations through one of the culture's most beloved expressive media.

While music and movement are limited in most Presbyterian churches and the Presbyterian-based CDF ministers use dance within a European framework, the Presbyterian Church is making a distinct effort to give the strong European structure a traditional Ghanaian flavor in order to keep worship services lively when "worldly people think church is dull."<sup>50</sup> Mainline churches today are concerned with augmenting the music and dancing in worship services to sustain their congregations and involve a younger population that might not otherwise be interested in their church.

---

<sup>48</sup> Seth Newman, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 13 April 2006

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Rejoice Sebuabe, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 26 April, 2006.

*African Independent Church: Apostles Revelation Society*

In 1914, Prophet Harris, a charismatic leader of an American Episcopal Church in Liberia, visited Ghana, while his converts traveled about the country starting their own churches.<sup>51</sup> The Apostles Revelation Society (ARS), the African Independent Church denomination in which I conducted my field research was established in 1939.<sup>52</sup> The church theology focuses on the role of the Holy Spirit, which is manifested through its prophetic leadership, and emphasis on healing through prayer and anointing according to the Bible.<sup>53</sup> Most pertinent to this study is the church's emphasis on its indigenous foundation.

The AIC church is credited with introducing Ghana Spirituals or local hymns, handclapping and traditional instruments into Ghanaian Christian worship. These instruments include drums, bells, shakers, and rattles. The ARS also shares the Presbyterian Hadzibale hymnbook,<sup>54</sup> although the songs are often adjusted to fit into the Highlife, *agbadza*, and *boboobo* rhythms.<sup>55</sup> When I visited the ARS church there was a mixture of traditional and Western instruments including the tambourine, drums, bell, and accordion. In an interview with Isaac Kpodo, the church's music director, he stated that the accordion was an instrument he picked up as a child and that it was a "gift from God," but uncommon in the ARS church.<sup>56</sup>

Sunday service illustrated the church's emphasis on prayer and indigenous music making. Unlike the Presbyterian and Evangelical Presbyterian churches, movement, with few restraints, was a prominent feature of worship. It began with a lively marching procession into the church by the choir using all of the above-mentioned instruments. In four hours that followed, singing

---

<sup>51</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> The Presbyterian Hadzibale hymnbook is the Ewe Evangelical Presbyterian hymnal. Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> Isaac Kpodo, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 30 April 2006.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

and dancing alternated with prayers or teachings. This produced a huge amount of movement throughout the worship service, with congregation members constantly moving from their knees to pray, and to their feet to sing and dance.

Unlike the Evangelical Presbyterian church, whenever drums were used to accompany singing, there was movement and clapping. When they were not used, singers stood stiffly. Like the Evangelical Presbyterian church, there were also several musical groups that performed during worship, although, the most favored performance was that of the *boboobo* group. The group, which sings Christian songs to traditional Ewe rhythm, is mostly made up of young adults and performs every Sunday, time permitting.<sup>57</sup> It is at this moment that people move from their pews into the aisles, begin to bend their knees, get low, and move to the rhythm. They wave handkerchiefs in the air, shout, and make other vocal sounds. At this time, the sanctuary becomes extremely lively as opposed to the solemnity and reverence of the prayer moments. Similarly, joyful dancing takes place during the marching procession to give offering.

The ARS church takes the Bible, especially the Old Testament, literally. For instance, the church believes that when Moses approached the burning bush, the Lord asked him to remove his shoes, for he was standing on holy ground. For this reason church attendees do not wear shoes into the sanctuary, because the chapel is believed to be holy ground.<sup>58</sup> When asked why they feel it is okay to dance in church, members of the church in essence replied, “Because the Bible said so.” Kpodo referred Psalm 150, which states:

Praise ye the Lord, Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power. Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness. Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery

---

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Frederick Afortude, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 30 April 2006.

and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals. Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord.

What I find most interesting about this particular verse, which clearly supports music and dance as a method of praise and worship by Christians, is the fact that it lists almost every type of instrument, including dance. Further, no distinction is made about the types of music or dance; rather it demands that if you have the desire to praise the Lord, then by *all* means, praise the Lord.

Like the Presbyterian Church, there is a conscious decision in the AIC church to use typically Ghanaian music and movement in the worship. Yet, as a denomination of churches created by Ghanaians for Ghanaians, AIC's sole mission since its founding has been to worship Christ in the most Ghanaian way possible. While I only had the opportunity to attend the ARS church, a good friend of mine had the opportunity to travel outside the Accra metropolitan area to another AIC denomination, the Twelve Apostles Church. Here she witnessed a church service in which the Holy Spirit touched church leaders in much the same way that a traditional Akan priestess might commune with deities through spirit possession; with dancing, drumming, and singing and all worshippers participating and positioned in the round.<sup>59</sup> Thus, in the AIC churches it seems that congregations have not lost anything Ghanaian in their worship style; rather they have only changed who they are worshipping. This may be due to the fact that an American missionary was the catalyst for the founding of these churches, instilling in his converts a sense of independence and autonomy in how they to worship and minister the Word of God. Whatever the cause, through maintaining the movement and music in their worship, AIC

---

<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Stovall, [estovall@colby.edu](mailto:estovall@colby.edu), "Twelve Apostles Church," personal email (13 March 2007).

worshippers maintain pride in their heritage during an era when the British have condemned that very heritage.

#### A NEW CULTURAL FUTURE: INNOVATIVE GHANAIAN WORSHIP AND GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

##### *Pentecostal Church: Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Students Association (PENSA)*

The Assemblies of God Pentecostal Church was established in Ghana in 1931 by the Assemblies of God Mission.<sup>60</sup> Similar to the AIC church, its theology emphasizes the Holy Spirit and Bible reading. Generally, Pentecostals believe that there is one God manifested in the Holy trinity, the entire Bible is the word of God containing all things necessary for salvation, and traditional spirits are evil and can be overcome through the power of Jesus Christ. Pentecostal practices include the laying on of hands, baptism by the Holy Spirit, baptism by immersion, and resurrection of the dead.<sup>61</sup>

Dancing is a distinct facet of Pentecostal worship and is characterized most specifically by the circle dancing done during the “Praises” part of the church service. During the Sunday service of Assemblies of God in Adenta, I walked into the church to the singing of a gospel Highlife tune and dancing by the members of the congregation. It seemed that as the spirit moved a person, he or she simply moved to the area in the front of the church between the first row of seating and the altar, and danced in a ring. I witnessed a similar form of “Praises” during a PENSA meeting on the Legon campus.

Among the large congregation on a Sunday morning, in late spring, there was one particular man who stood up often during any part of the service that was not the sermon. He

---

<sup>60</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 20-21.

would lift his palms toward the sky, sway from side to side, and give short shouts. While his behavior did not resonate with my experiences in the Pentecostal church, the fact that he was free to move about in this manner during the service underscores the difference between this church and other field sites. Mission and AIC congregation members could certainly behave this way had they wanted; however, their worshipping environment did not compel them to do so.

The practices and expressions of Pentecostalism, which has a number of Ghanaian followers, does not employ indigenous forms of music and dance as a form of reconciliation with Christianity as in contemporary mission churches. Yet by allowing music and dance unrelated to traditional forms of worship, which is often taboo among Pentecostals (who ban the use of sacred dances), the church is in a sense more liberal about the use of music and dance to praise the Lord. Moreover, other idioms of the contemporary popular culture are engaged in worship. Birgit Meyer coins the term *pentecostalite*-public culture in which:

Pentecostalite expressive forms are characterized by a distinct cultural style that crosscuts different artistic forms (Such as music, popular theater, call-in radio programs, and video-films) and that testifies to the convergence of Pentecostalism and popular culture in the newly constituted public realm.<sup>62</sup>

Meyer argues that the new Pentecostal public culture is not the evolution of tradition but a break with a traditional past. “Pentecostalism recasts modernity as a Christian project.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, the modernization of Ghanaian life is made possible by the idioms of Pentecostal worship and lifestyle. Furthermore, Meyer points out that religions cannot be analyzed apart from the

---

<sup>62</sup> Birgit Meyer, “‘Praise the Lord’: Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana’s New Public Sphere.” *American Ethnologist* (2003), 92.

<sup>63</sup> Meyer, “Praise the Lord,” 93.

practices that define them. Today, electronic media is the mode through which religion and culture are shared, whereas, in previous times dance and music were the sole media.<sup>64</sup>

Not only do Pentecostalism's formal practices displace traditional ones, but the content addressed by Pentecostal ministers preaches a modernized future and negates the practices of traditional religious culture. Through colonialism, Europeans exported to Africa ideas about religion and culture, and implemented these ideas through establishing urban centers with mission schools and churches. According to Birgit Meyer, this legacy left a desire for a modern urban life that was equated with a happy life.<sup>65</sup> Pentecostals promote Christianity as a necessary form of self-control in life, while labeling most aspects of traditional culture as evil and old-fashioned. Robert Nicholls echoes Meyer's sentiment that Christianity is a mechanism of modernity because with Christianity comes Western values and Western ideas about progress and what is modern.<sup>66</sup>

Paul Gifford cites Pentecostal preacher Mensa Otabil, as an example of Pentecostal leaders who reinforce the idea that traditional African culture belongs to the past and is blocking African modernization. In Otabil's sermon "Pulling Down the Strongholds," he describes several cultural obstructions that are "holding Africans back." These include an inferiority complex, tribalism, cultural stagnation, idolatry and fetishism, a village mentality, negative leadership, and apathy.<sup>67</sup> He says:

Ghanaians must look to the future, and accept change. 'The problem with Ghana and I suppose most African nations is that we allow our history and our past to influence our present and design our future. Much of what we call our culture is

---

<sup>64</sup> Meyer, "Praise the Lord," 94.

<sup>65</sup> Meyer, "Praise the Lord," 102.

<sup>66</sup> Nicholls, "African Dance," 49.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism In a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 126-130.



actually the lifestyle of people who lived about 300 years ago and their way of understanding the world they lived in. It's not *our* culture; it's *their* culture, *their* way of life... Their principles can often be salvaged, but not their practices.'<sup>68</sup>

His sermon suggests to Pentecostal followers that customary religious practices and culture are ancient history. He does not call for the evolution and acculturation of these practices; rather he urges Ghanaians to leave them alone and concentrate on modernization, globalization, prosperity, and success. His message emphasizes the idea of breaking with the past and creating an entirely new cultural future.

Traditional culture is further demonized by casting the many spirits associated with traditional religions in the league of Satan. The popularity of Pentecostal churches stems in part from their willingness to seriously consider popular views of spirituality, a prominent factor of local religion. Satan and other demonic spirits are central to Ghanaian Christianity; Pentecostals take traditional spirits as a point of departure,<sup>69</sup> yet spirits and witchcraft are now considered evil.<sup>70</sup>

The freedom with which Pentecostals worship, including moving as they wish to join the "Praises" circle, singing hymns and popular gospel Highlife music, and physically and vocally affirming the ministering that occurs in the service, acknowledges a break with the historical past the desire to create new traditions, and the ability to freely express oneself within the faith. While mainline churches and AIC's turn to Ghanaian tradition to negotiate their imported religion, the consistently growing Pentecostal population finds innovative practices to take the Ghanaian people into a new cultural future that merges fresh styles of Ghanaian worship with modern and global Christianity.

---

<sup>68</sup> Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 131.

<sup>69</sup> Meyer, "Praise the Lord," 96.

<sup>70</sup> Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 85.

*Charismatic Church: Christian Action Faith Ministries (Action Chapel), Royal House Chapel International*

The Charismatic or “Neo-Pentecostal churches” emerged from the 1960s Evangelical movement. Initially limited to the Ghanaian elite and focused on education and Bible study, the new churches became a mass movement in the 1970s influenced by a similar phenomena in the United States. Healing, renewal, baptism, and speaking in tongues emerged across denominations.<sup>71</sup> Charismatic churches, while maintaining the same fundamental theology as Pentecostals, believe themselves to be a more bible based church. Most importantly, they believe that the individual is endowed with the Holy Spirit and should use his or her gifts to minister to themselves and to the church. Further, in these churches, people with similar gifts should come together as a ministry, such as a dance ministry.<sup>72</sup>

In both Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, the key element of worship is participation. This is encouraged by music with song lyrics that are short, simple, and in the vernacular language. The style is call and response, and it is sung in a single key. In addition to local hymns, praise teams, solo singing, and movement is integral to the service.<sup>73</sup> On Easter Sunday, I attended the Action Chapel, arriving just in time to witness some choir singing the sermon, and to take offering and communion. Although I missed the beginning of the service, Frances Osei, a long time member of the church, informed me that the beginning of the service is characterized by “Worship,” during which slow songs are sung and individuals have the opportunity to pray aloud. During the singing, people stand on their feet and lift their hands. This is followed by the “Praises,” which I witnessed in the Pentecostal church. During this part of the service, gospel

---

<sup>71</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 21.

<sup>73</sup> Agordoh, *Music in Christian Worship*, 106-107.

Highlife music may be performed, while individuals come to the front of the church to dance in a circle.<sup>74</sup>

When I entered the church, the choir was singing an American tune, “Oh Happy Day,” while musicians were using jazz drums, keyboard, traditional drums, and shakers. Because the Charismatic influence comes from the United States, many aspects of the service are conducted in this style. The churches often use American gospel music, and to an American observer the church itself was more American than African. The service itself was conducted in English. This church is what I would characterize in the United States as a “mega-church,” a term that generally refers to any Protestant congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2000 persons or more at its worship services.<sup>75</sup> Besides its huge building, the sanctuary was complete with three levels of seating, two projector screens, and an altar that looked like a theater stage.

Considering the movement I observed during the sermon, for all intents and purposes, the altar was treated as a stage. As the preacher spoke, there was the peculiar movement: much of the congregation walked toward the altar and placed money in the collection baskets. It reminded me of the African tradition to place money on the forehead of a performer to indicate enjoyment of the performance. The preacher performed his role of delivering God’s message in a fervent Ghanaian-dialect English to an audience of financially secure Ghanaians. Aside from the wonderful variety of clothing worn by the congregants, this performer-audience dynamic was the only African aspect of the service. The movement of so many people during the service was peculiar, and in comparison to other services I attended, this movement praised the preacher,

---

<sup>74</sup> Frances Osei, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 1 May 2006.

<sup>75</sup> “Megachurch definition,” *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*.  
<http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html> (8 March 2007).

rather than God Almighty above. Joe Burris, a *Baltimore Sun* Reporter defines this practice as a “seed offering”:

There are two schools of thought behind the practice, which is popular in charismatic, nontraditional styles of worship. The first is that if the minister utters something that resonates with you spiritually, you place money at the altar tantamount to sowing a seed in the ground -- and ultimately you will reap blessings. The second is that if you're inspired by the minister's teachings, you need not wait for the offertory to give.<sup>76</sup>

The action of the congregation explains the negative talk about Ghanaian Charismatic churches and their “prosperity gospels,” particularly at Action Chapel. According to several residents of Accra, Action Chapel is a place for the wealthy only, and the pastor simply takes money from the congregation in order to make himself rich.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, the vast parking lot outside the enormous expanding church revealed luxury cars, such as BMWs everywhere. It was obvious that the people who attended this church were among the middle and upper class population.

At a Tuesday evening service at Royal House Chapel International Church, I witnessed another type of movement that also took place at Action Chapel. This movement, performed throughout the worship service, seemed to be an importation of African-American modes of expression during Christian worship and included shouting, hand clapping, and the shaking of tambourines. In addition, worshippers, as a group, lifted hands and vocally responded to the pastor’s words. Unlike mainline churches and AIC’s, these actions were not limited to the assigned praise and worship times. The apparent replication of an African-American worship style demonstrates a Ghanaian tendency to look toward and imitate the West. The West is the

---

<sup>76</sup> Joe Burris, “Seed Offerings Sprout at Churches,” *Baltimore Sun*, 3 December 2006.

<sup>77</sup> Rose Taylor, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 16 April 2006.

modern, developed world that Ghana has sought to join since independence. The philosophy of Ghanaian Charismatic churches is that Ghanaians must separate themselves from manifestations of their own rich cultural heritage, such as traditional music and dance, because it is holding them back from a Westernized future. The worshippers in these churches are professionals and artisans; the people who labor in the capitalist structure, and believe in modernity. Their worship style reflects their goals for Ghanaian people.

One facet of mega-Charismatic churches is that there are several ministries in which the congregation may become involved. The United Young Dancers' ministry grew out of the young adult ministry at the Royal House Chapel International church. It started in 1997 and is currently led by Kofi Gademe, a dancer who leads the Hayor Dance Company in New Town, Accra. He noticed that choreography was the way to win souls to church; it encouraged young adults to "come and boogie" at church instead of going to a nightclub or drinking spot.<sup>78</sup> So, for almost ten years, the young adults at Royal House have performed choreographies in the name of the Lord.

"Bro Kofi," as he is affectionately called, is the sole choreographer for the group and uses a wide variety of movements for his choreography, which is danced to a variety of world Christian music. In order to create his choreographies he often chooses a theme or storyline and then weaves movement and music together to communicate that message. Sometimes this method is used to make dance-dramas such as the "Death of Christ," that was performed at Easter. Another mode of choreographing, however, is to play music and let the dancers improvise and come up with movement. He then puts a dance together based on some of the movements they have created. This method not only keeps everyone involved but also ensures that everyone is doing dance movements that he or she is able to do.

---

<sup>78</sup> Kofi Gademe, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 25 April 2006.

In terms of movement, Gademeh does not restrict himself to the interpretation of lyrics, nor does he limit the types of movement he uses. For instance, while he certainly incorporates traditional African dance, he uses not only Ghanaian dance but has also incorporated other African dance forms, such as the South African type of step dancing known as *gumboot*, into a dance work called “Step on the Enemy.” He uses acrobatic and modern dance movements, including somersaults, shoulder rolls, barrel turns, and partner lifts. Like Newman, he is careful not to use inappropriate movement in church; nothing suggestive of sex or fetish dancing.<sup>79</sup>

While Kofi uses Christian music from all over the world, he has a personal love for American gospel music. “I feel like, let me do something... . The way that Americans do their praise and worship, I love it.”<sup>80</sup> In essence, this particular type of music inspires him to move. Again, familiarity is the key to communication, and the songs he chooses are familiar to the congregation. As far as traditional Ghanaian drum rhythms, they are used but not necessarily in order to perform a specific dance, merely to provide a sound backdrop for a scene, entrance, or exit.

The first piece of choreography that I saw United Young Dancers perform was to “Revolution,” a hit song by contemporary Gospel superstar Kirk Franklin. The costuming was army fatigues, and the movements were pedestrian and acrobatic, with simple formations. The message of the dance was that Christians were in battle against the enemy (Satan). The work was eerily similar to a piece performed by Ava Field’s Dance Ministry in Baltimore to the song “Stomp,” by the same artist. Even the costuming was the same. While I am sure Gademeh and Fields have never met one another, perhaps the choice of music dictated the dance concept and this produced similar pieces. What is important is that Gademeh’s use of American music infuses

---

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

his dance presentations with American concepts, such as fighting the devil in military style. Everything about Gademeh's teaching approach, the movement vocabulary the dancers work within, and the music they choose, is almost a carbon copy of black American dance ministries in the United States. In dance as in so many other realms, the church links Ghanaian aspirations to American-style cultural expressions.

### *Conclusions*

I discovered five different ways in which Ghanaians use movement in church as a mode of praise, worship, and ministry. The first and most basic is the Highlife dancing of praise, found in almost any church that incorporates popular Ghanaian Christian music into their services. Moving to this often involves bouncing up and down, or moving side to side as the music dictates, waving handkerchiefs in the air etc. The second type of dancing takes this a step further and is found mostly in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. This is a circle dance performed in the front of the church during "Praises" that can involve so many people moved by the Spirit that circles may be formed inside of circles inside of circles.<sup>81</sup> A third procession type of dance takes place most often during the giving of the tithes and offering but can also take the form of a march into the sanctuary to begin the service. An example of this occurred on Palm Sunday at the Adenta EP Church, when members marched into the sanctuary in a lively manner, singing and waving palm branches in the air.

I would term the fourth type of movement as emphatic movement. This includes waving hands, lifting palms toward the sky, stamping feet, and standing up throughout the service. Vocalization of some sort often accompanies this movement. This was particular to the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. These movements are often a reaction to the music,

---

<sup>81</sup> Sara Rasmans, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 2 May 2006.

prayer, or preaching during the service and underline a person's particular concurrence with and understanding of what is happening. Here I would include the contribution of money in praise of the preaching at the Action Chapel.

Lastly, there is the dance ministry that is most commonly identified as the youth group or the choreography group in many churches. The mission of these groups is twofold; first, to evangelize through the medium of dance, and second, to keep young people as members of the church. In my experiences with dance ministries at both a mainline and a Charismatic church, these aims are fully met. There were two strong commonalities among the dance ministries. The first was the emphasis on prayer, and the second was the reason for their communion as a group. Each rehearsal began and ended in prayers during which the dancers took turns asking for God's spirit to anoint the occasion that we had gathered for. Everyone was clear about their purpose and mission. Obiri Amoah, for instance, has been part of CDF for more than ten years and chose to join the group because of its evangelism. He realized that although he was shy when speaking to people in order to minister to them, he could dance and use movement as an effective medium to communicate the Gospel.<sup>82</sup> Every rehearsal of each dance ministry was lively, joyful, and spirited. I believe that it is because of a clear understanding of the purpose that the participants were committed to their respective ministries, whether it was two o'clock on Sunday afternoon directly after service, or Wednesday at midnight after a long day of work.

The differing types of movement among denominations reveal a complex relationship that Ghanaians have with Christianity. In each denomination, Ghanaians must reconcile the religious traditions of their ancestors with their contemporary Christian beliefs. Using traditional dances in church contradicts the theology and philosophy of the older mission churches that preach against the practice of fetish religion. Yet, the consensus I gathered from Newman,

---

<sup>82</sup> Obiri Amoah, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 26 April 2006.



Individual, and Gademeh is that as long as you dance to Christian lyrics then it is fine to use traditional movement. They all explained that only traditional social dances are used in the church. “When you dance *adowa* in church it is not a sin because you are dancing on the lyrics of gospel music.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, Christian songs seem to neutralize any evils that might be associated with these dances. A secular dance such as the *fontomfrom* could be used in the church, but instead of pointing the chief, you would point God above.

By contrast, fetish dances involving possession, such as *Akɔm* (from the Ashanti) are not allowed in church because they are seen as evil.<sup>84</sup> Ghanaian Christians abandon all communion with gods other than the omnipotent God of the Bible, and with all spirits other than the Holy Trinity. Treating the fetish dances as taboo acknowledges their power and it is interesting that Ghanaians do not necessarily feel that the power of Christ will overcome the evil of participating in this worship. Rather, a fetish participant is flirting with satanic spirits. For Ghanaian converts, Christian practices and beliefs do not provide enough of an “effective antidote to the fear of attacks from witchcrafts and juju.”<sup>85</sup>

The use of only social rhythms and the view of fetish dances as taboo illustrates the rupture between Christianity and the spirituality of traditional religions. Many argue that Ghana still has a colonized mind. If so, this is an example. The country’s Christian fervor does not allow for the integration of faith visible in the religion of Africans of the Diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean islands. Instead Ghanaian Christians have adapted A.M. Opoku’s concept of neo-traditional choreography, taking care that the movement does not “undermine the faith”; in other

---

<sup>83</sup> Individual, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 19 April 2006.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Atiemo, *Rise of Charismatic... Ghana*, 43.

words, is not obscene or offensive. In Newman's case, he feels he must customize the movement in order to "promote holiness."<sup>86</sup>

Some Ghanaians fail to realize that *not* moving in church is a European cultural custom and not a facet of the Christian faith. Ghanaians cannot seem to shake this idea, and there is still a stigma attached to dancing, especially any traditional dance, in church. In the churches where the most dancing takes place such as the Pentecostal and Charismatic, the movement chiefly borrows from African-Americans and other global forms, rather than Ghanaian traditional dances.

Dance in church not only keeps the service lively and participatory, but allows Ghanaian members to experience kinesthetically what it means to be Ghanaian. Regardless of the extent to which movement is incorporated into worship services, it exists as an expression of the culture – looking toward Ghana's past, forging a neo-traditional Christian style, and looking toward a Ghanaian future that adopts styles of the West. Steven spoke most eloquently about dancing as a Ghanaian Christian:

Well, first of all, I am a Ghanaian, and I want to be a Ghanaian, and I see that being a Ghanaian I can also be a Christian, a Ghanaian Christian, just as a Nigerian can be a Nigerian Christian. So if I am a Ghanaian, and I have something in me that I want to give out, I will give what I have.... So being a Christian in Ghana doesn't mean that I should go away from my movements and my dances. I have my dances, and I have my movements, and I am a Christian. So why can't I communicate my dances in my worship to God, to Christ? ...[W]e use our dances to communicate whatever we worship; we have worship dances; we

---

<sup>86</sup> Seth Newman, "To be African is to Dance" (March/April 2003), *Horizons*: 27.

have evangelistic dances; we have social dances... so many dances, and these are beautiful dances.<sup>87</sup>

He knows that he must use the gifts that God gave him in order to express praise and worship and to minister to himself and others. Movement in the church is an affirmation of Ghanaian culture, remembering how Ghanaians used to worship even after white men told him not to. Moreover, while dancing for worship expresses the contemporary merging and conflicting aspects of the culture, Ghanaians *own* their faith and expressly communicate it through their dancing.

---

<sup>87</sup> Steven Ajayku, interview with Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 9 April 2006.

## BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

The history of African-Americans is fundamentally connected to Christianity. From the moment Africans who were soon to be enslaved came into contact with European slave traders, they came into contact with a Christian ideology that enslaved and oppressed them. Yet, this ideology later became a tool of resistance and a source of strength as they liberated and defined themselves as a people in the United States. According to authors Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, “[Christianity] provided Afro-Atlantic peoples with an ideology of resistance and the means to absorb the cultural norms that turned Africans into African-Americans.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, Christianity was the medium through which African-American culture crystallized. It was the way in which African people related to Christianity in the American context that emphasized and brought to fruition significant cultural characteristics. Unlike the Western Euro-Americans, who are content to know about God through doctrines and creeds, African peoples want to *know* and *experience* God within themselves, as a community and in relation to their whole lives.<sup>89</sup> Thus, their methods of worship, such as music and dance, become a barometer of what is important to them as a people.

Ritual action in African-American Christian worship perpetually changes in response to the social, political, and economic state of the communities who practice the faith. Author Melva Wilson Costen asserts: “African American *leitourgia* (liturgy) – the work of the people as ritual action, ministry, and service – is reflective of the experiences of a particular people deeply aware of the power and the promise of God.”<sup>90</sup> Costen argues that the ritual of worship allows people to transcend existing social structures and affirm themselves. For example, when one is filled

---

<sup>88</sup> Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>89</sup> Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>90</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 23.

with the Holy Spirit and begins to shout, also known as “getting happy,” that physical spiritual experience affirms an African spiritual experience in an American context. In Baltimore, Maryland, an historical and contemporary hub for black culture in the United States, the church has been central to black communities. Since idioms of the culture reveal themselves in the context of worship, observing movement for worship in Baltimore’s African-American churches exposes contemporary issues and facets of the community while simultaneously negotiating the traditions and customs of established and historic black Baltimore Christian communities.

Enslaved Africans in America converted to Christianity because it was the religion imposed on them by their masters. Yet, they found agency in their worship through dance and music, as they expressed a new Christian spirituality. As explained in the earlier chapter on Ghana, in West African cultures, dance is holistically integrated into people’s lives. Accordingly, spirituality is indistinguishable from dance.<sup>91</sup> During the Middle Passage, captives literally danced their way to the Americas. White slavers forced them to dance by the threat of the whip, in order to exercise their bodies and thus secure higher prices on the auction block.<sup>92</sup> What these slavers failed to realize was that “dancing” the slaves facilitated the continuity of their own spirituality and heritage. At the same time, however, dance and spirituality for the slaves took on new meaning within the restraints of white slave masters. A new African-American religious experience was forged because *how* slaves worshipped, regardless of the amount of African culture they maintained, existed solely in relation to their slave masters’ regulations.

According to Henry Mitchell in his book *Black Church Beginnings*, slaves were open to accepting Christianity. In West African cultures, even if someone’s belief system is different, it is equally valid. If someone else’s god brings good fortune, than it is best to adapt that god into

---

<sup>91</sup> Sterling P. Stuckey, “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance” in *Dancing Many Drums* ed. Thomas DeFrantz (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>92</sup> Stuckey, “Christian Conversion and Dance,” 39.

one's belief system. As a result, slaves were eager to learn about the white man's God who brought so much power.<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately, the Christianity taught to them by white slave owners was a "convenient" form. Slaves received the message of God in order to be "saved"<sup>94</sup> and become a "good slave."<sup>95</sup> A "good slave," was epitomized in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Civil War era novel as Uncle Tom; the black man who obeys the white man and when treated wrongly simply kneels to pray. This convenient form of Christianity dispensed by whites not only enslaved, but marginalized, disrespected, and oppressed African people in America, deepening the need for a place of community and refuge among them.<sup>96</sup> Ironically, it was their adopted Christian faith to which they retreated.

Yet, the African-American adaptation of Christianity recast the religious concepts taught to them in functional terms.<sup>97</sup> In other words, African Americans had to make Christianity work for them, and in that process they codified cultural customs. On many plantations, slaves chose to have secret religious meetings outside of master-approved church services. These meetings were referred to as "Invisible Institutions" in numerous slave narratives.<sup>98</sup> They were a place where slaves found freedom in sharing their faith with one another as opposed to participating in worship with whites who preached a hypocritical Christianity.<sup>99</sup> In these gatherings, symbols and ritual actions gradually crystallized around the shared experiences of slaves with an underlying focus on experiential worship through one's being and with one's community. For example, slave owners declared drumming sinful when they realized it was a tool of

---

<sup>93</sup> Henry Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 32-33.

<sup>94</sup> "To be "saved" is a colloquial expression used when one becomes a Christian, professing that Jesus Christ is Lord and He died to save human kind from their sins.

<sup>95</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 28.

<sup>96</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 14.

<sup>97</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 19.

<sup>98</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 36.

<sup>99</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 14-15.

communication that they did not understand. In response, slaves replaced the drums with hand clapping and foot patting, physical and percussive modes of worship.<sup>100</sup> For slaves, conversion and baptism were important events in their communal sharing of faith. Praise and worship services were valuable to slaves as well because it was here through singing and dancing, that the human encounter with God was real.<sup>101</sup> Further, spiritual gifts including shouting and speaking in tongues were encouraged.<sup>102</sup> Each of these aspects of worship was a way to *know* God, as well as feel Him and His power with one's entirety. This sacred corporeal experience among slaves revived the link between their older African spirituality and their newfound American situation.<sup>103</sup> The movement and music of this new African-American worship was the vehicle through which slaves found freedom at a time when they did not have control over their own lives.

Historically, the African-American struggle against oppression and marginalization has sustained and even deepened a dependency on faith to get people through adverse experiences. Consequently, from the "Invisible Institutions" of the slave era to the later founding of black congregations, the church has been central to the livelihood of African-American communities. One such community exists in Baltimore, Maryland, whose demographics were significantly shaped by slavery, ship building, and factory industries. According to author Leroy Graham, Baltimore, both before and after the Civil War, had one of largest black populations in the nineteenth century.<sup>104</sup> The early part of the 1800s saw significant ambivalence on slavery in the city; there was a community of free blacks and considerable abolitionist activity, yet plantation

---

<sup>100</sup> Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 4.

<sup>101</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 20.

<sup>102</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 15.

<sup>103</sup> Lynn Garafola, "Dance and Slavery," lecture, 14 September 2005.

<sup>104</sup> Leroy Graham, *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital* (New York: University Press of America, 1982), 252.

owners governed the city, and there was still a strong slave presence. Blacks, free or not, could easily be “sold South” or into re-enslavement.<sup>105</sup> Despite the dangerous position of blacks in the city they continued to buy their freedom, while building and maintaining strong communities with businesses, schools, and churches. At the end of the Civil War, the city had 26,000 freed men and women, the largest urban concentration of African-Americans in the United States.<sup>106</sup> Churches were the hubs of the black community, central to its social, political, and cultural life. Graham writes that these churches were “noted to be the largest and finest group amongst a black population.”<sup>107</sup>

The late 1700s through the 1800s saw the establishment of African-American congregations and the founding of African American denominations, many of which have survived to the present day. Each of the churches in their particular denominations served its members in the way that responded to their needs and situation. Yet, regardless of denomination, worship services revealed a common African heritage that provided fundamental ways of knowing and experiencing God, and a shared experience of oppression and hardship in the United States.<sup>108</sup> As far as the degree of physical movement that was incorporated into their worship, some congregations brought the ring shout<sup>109</sup> into the church, thus revealing a continuity of Africanisms in African-American Christian worship. Promotion and criticism of the ring shout exposed the need to encourage or suppress African cultural retentions in light of the social position of African Americans during the nineteenth century. Other congregations kept movement to a minimum and were labeled “frozen” or “stale.” Generally speaking though, there

---

<sup>105</sup> McDougall, *Black Baltimore*, 25.

<sup>106</sup> Graham, *Baltimore*, 252.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 13.

<sup>109</sup> The ring shout is an African ritual that stems from the slavery era and is still practiced in some areas of South Carolina. The dance consists of shouters moving around a circle, shuffling their feet, clapping their hands, and singing spirituals.



has been an upward trend toward more expressive worship in African American churches especially since the 1960s.<sup>110</sup>

Today, congregations still worship with varying degrees of physical expression in their services, emphasizing that there is no one “black church experience.” Furthermore, the experience and worship style within local churches may widely vary even within denominations. In this study, all of the churches examined are mainline churches, yet due to their particular histories, the contemporary context, and various influences, the churches employ radically different styles of worship. How congregations move and conduct worship reflects not only the population of the congregation and issues in their communities, but also popular social, political, and religious trends. Most importantly, the movement and worship styles of Baltimore’s African-American churches simultaneously respond to the contemporary needs and preferences in the community while negotiating with an established African-American denominational liturgy.

---

<sup>110</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 16.

## CONVENTIONAL MAINLINE CHURCHES: LIMITED MOVEMENT IN WORSHIP AND DWINDLING CONGREGATIONS

### *Baptist Church: First Baptist Church*

Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, Baptist and Methodist preachers began to evangelize among enslaved Africans. Contrary to earlier efforts by Anglicans and Presbyterians, Africans took to Baptist and Methodist worship because of the emphasis in these denominations on the worship *experience*. While the Anglicans and Presbyterians emphasized ritual and doctrine, Baptists and Methodists emphasized the “conversion experience and encouraged shouting, trembling, and ecstatic singing in their services.”<sup>111</sup> During the early 1770s hundreds of Africans were baptized into the Baptist and Methodist denominations. Not only did blacks begin to make up a large percentage of the congregations, but they also took leadership roles in these churches, becoming preachers themselves. Slaves felt welcome not only because of the ability to participate in the worship experience but also because leaders in these denominations denounced slavery.<sup>112</sup>

Several sources confirm that the first black congregation on record in the United States was the “Bluestone” African Baptist church organized in 1758 in an area now known as Mecklenburg, Virginia.<sup>113</sup> Although it was an all black congregation, the church as well as many other Baptist congregations remained connected to the theology and doctrine of the Euro-American denomination. While predominately African-American congregations were separate from white denominations, white Baptist associations controlled their black constituency through restrictions and unjust regulations. As a consequence, black Baptist congregations created their

---

<sup>111</sup> Randall Balmer, Jon Butler and Grant Wacker, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 112.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 83.

own Baptist associations, with autonomous governing bodies.<sup>114</sup> Many of the churches were connected to the African Baptist Missionary Society that dedicated its time to mission work in Africa.<sup>115</sup> This dedication to service and advocacy for political and social injustice that was the impetus for black congregations to separate from their parent bodies has come to characterize black Baptist churches and set them apart from Euro-American counterparts.

The foundation of Baptist theology is individualism: “a belief that the individual is able to interpret the will of God for himself or herself.”<sup>116</sup> As such, individuals have the power and responsibility to understand the Word of God for themselves. The autonomous nature of the theology extends to the authority of local churches, which means that theological interpretations of individual congregations is extremely diverse. This diversity extends into the structure and elements of the worship service.<sup>117</sup>

According to Costen, the liturgy may be simple or detailed with a beginning devotional period and a call to “formal” worship. Walter F. Pitts argues that Afro-Baptist worship services follow one of two “ritual frames,” a trajectory of events during a worship service that are all connected. There is an emphasis on music and prayers that builds to the preaching and the invitation to discipleship at the end.<sup>118</sup> Services that follow these frames “transport worshippers along a continuum of spiritual uplifting moments.”<sup>119</sup> The development of the worship in this way creates a spiritually and emotionally intense atmosphere, yet provides the opportunity for a worshipper to be free to express themselves and love for Christ. Resonating in the experience of liminality in traditional African religious trance, Pitts asserts that the Baptist ritual frames are an

---

<sup>114</sup> Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 115.

<sup>115</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 112.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Costen, Melva Wilson. *In Spirit and In Truth: The Music of African American Worship*. (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2004), 155.

inheritance of traditional African religious worship.<sup>120</sup> Further he argues that “Afro-Baptist worship experiences function to transport worshippers psychically and emotionally from a hostile world to a smaller, more secure place where they can be equipped to return to the world ready and able to face life at a higher level.”<sup>121</sup> This theory of finding a place in worship that transports one out of the harshness of the outside world and prepares them to be more equipped to face it when they leave can certainly be true for black Baptist congregations in Baltimore.

Ex-slave Moses Clayton established Maryland’s first black Baptist church in 1836. Originally named the First Colored Baptist Church of Baltimore, Clayton served as pastor until he died in 1861.<sup>122</sup> The present building was erected in 1880 and is now known as the First Baptist Church.<sup>123</sup> Located in East Baltimore, in the heart of the Johns Hopkins Hospital neighborhood, the church building sits on a corner amid old Baltimore row houses and the perpetually expanding hospital.

On Sunday, November 5, 2006, I visited the church’s Sunday communion service, which lasted from 11 a.m. to 1:45 p.m. I was struck by the enormous emphasis on music in the worship service; in fact, most of the service was given over to music and singing. At least fourteen songs were performed throughout the service (the minimum listed in the program) by the Mass Choir, soloists, the children’s choir, and the congregation. The First Baptist Church liturgy closely follows the Pitts model in Afro-Baptist worship. The emphasis on music during the service generated a lively spirit in the sanctuary and a great deal of movement. According to Mrs. Frances Parks, in her forty year membership at First Baptist, the worship generally follows the

---

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 97.

<sup>123</sup> First Baptist Church pamphlet, 5 November 2006.

prescribed liturgy. Over the years though, they have incorporated a wider variety of contemporary religious music to appeal to the desires and changes in congregants.<sup>124</sup>

For the most part, the movement that took place during the worship was musically inspired. For instance, spirits stirred during the Meditational Solo, which in reality was a duet between man and a woman singing, “Just because You are God...” Throughout the song tambourines shook. People stood up with open arms, outstretched in front of them or above their heads. The woman’s singing turned into a speech-song of her testimony, which turned into shouting the song into the microphone. One man was so moved by the song that he stamped, jumped, and stomped while bending over backward and forward. All of this was accompanied by his shouts of “Thank You Jesus” that changed into speaking tongues.<sup>125</sup> The congregation was similarly moved by the sermon, which was punctuated emphatic movements<sup>126</sup> and shouts of “Say Amen!” and “That’s Right!” This particular song followed by the sermon happened near the end of the long liturgy. Each song and prayer built upon the next to climax into these spirit filled moments.

The first moment of organized movement in the service that I witnessed took place during the tithes and offering. In this service, giving tithes occurred separately from giving offering. Again, with a focus on the individual, persons wanting to tithe walked to the altar in order to drop envelopes into baskets. The procedure for giving offering was much different. A processional of the ushers, all women, moved down the aisle to the music of the children’s choir, the New Light Singers. It was a quiet dignified march in which they swayed to the beat *one two, one two, one two*, stepping first on their right foot then on their left, and swinging their arms

---

<sup>124</sup> Frances Parks, telephone interview by Sydnie Mosley, 21 April 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Speaking Tongues, technically known as glossolalia, is ecstatic speech which may sound like babbling. Christians consider it a spiritual gift of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>126</sup> See page 37 for a detailed description of emphatic movement.

easily. Members of the congregation stood to clap for them as they marched by the pews. The ushers' march, orderly and calm, elicited awe from congregation members. While this movement was not the grandest or liveliest that occurred in the service, the attention given to the processing ushers demonstrated respect for controlled movement. The processional was dramatically different from spontaneous movement inspired by the music and sermon. Yet in each case there was a respect for what the movement represented among the congregation, whether it was about nobly stepping on the beat to offer a monetary gift to the ministry in the name of the Lord, or letting the spirit of God occupy one's body causing it to move impulsively.

Movement and dance in First Baptist Church demonstrate tensions between a traditional Baptist liturgy and the contemporary needs of congregants. According to Parks, membership has steadily declined since the late 1960s. Since it is an older church, many of the members have died. Amidst this struggle to maintain and revitalize membership, the church instituted many community programs and social events. One of these is the "Senior Prom," a "school dance" for adults. Parks says that when she first joined, an event with secular music and dancing such as the "Electric Slide," would never be allowed in the church. Yet this, among other events, is an effort to keep the congregation involved and engage new members. In contrast, the pastor, Reverend Leroy Fitts, does not want a dance ministry in the church. While Parks is unaware of his reasoning, she does know that a capable constituency of dancers has requested to form a ministry on more than one occasion in the past three years, to no avail. While Reverend Fitts consents to a variety of social events such as youth bowling or a cookout, and community outreach such as a monthly soup kitchen and daycare, he remains conservative about the use of formal dance as a method of worship.<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Frances Parks, telephone interview by Sydnie Mosley, 21 April 2007.

Due to the autonomous nature of the Baptist church, the use of dance for worship among Baptists widely varies. Thus, while Reverend Fitts' conservatism concerning dance is not true of all Baptist, it is probably indicative of Baltimore's older Baptist congregations. Worship in First Baptist is not "stale." Yet, it does not participate in trends that are popular among African-American Christians. Just like the Ghanaian mainline churches, First Baptist struggles with finding interesting ways to grow membership. The Ghanaian solution, though, has been to incorporate more dancing. Fitts instead, limits the types of movement allowed in worship which in effect limits the involvement of congregants. His choice curbs the appeal of First Baptist's worship, when extensive movement during worship, including dance ministries, is a current trend.

*Methodist: Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church. John Wesley United Methodist Church*

According to Costen, many elements of the early Methodist tradition appealed to African Americans. One was the uninhibited enthusiasm in the worship. Spiritual discipline and piety were also attractive.<sup>128</sup> Like black Baptists, black Methodists made up a significant portion of early white Methodist congregations. It was only when African-Americans tired of racial injustices did black congregations secede from their parent churches. The forms of worship in these new churches were similar to those of the parent Methodist body, but styles of action were culturally and contextually determined. Rituals, such as the sacraments of communion and baptism, were adapted from the Euro-American Methodist church.<sup>129</sup> While early Methodists were open to Africanist style worship, this style became gradually less acceptable to the growing

---

<sup>128</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 109.

<sup>129</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 110.

number of freed and educated blacks who were both the clergy and congregation members of black Methodist churches. This population of African-Americans wanted to disassociate themselves from “heathen” slave practices as they established themselves as a black middle class.

Incorporated in 1787 by black secessionists from the Lovely Lane and Strawberry Alley Methodist churches, Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church was Baltimore’s first black church congregation and the first black Methodist church in the United States.<sup>130</sup> Some of the earliest institutionalized black Methodist clergy came from this church.<sup>131</sup> While many of these church leaders left the congregation to found other black denominations, the Sharp Street congregation continued its affiliation with the white controlled Methodist Episcopal church until 1864.<sup>132</sup> Originally located on Sharp Street in the downtown Baltimore area, in 1800 it moved to its current location on Etting and Dolphin Streets in west Baltimore thus following the northward migration of the African-American population. It was at this time that it became known as Sharp Street Memorial.<sup>133</sup>

The Sharp Street Memorial worship experience illustrates conflict and tensions between the worship tradition of long-time church members and the hopes of a new young pastor. The stereotype of “stale” worship for older black churches certainly begins to describe the communion Sunday worship service I attended in October 2006. At the 11 a.m. service, the congregation was made up of perhaps one hundred people, scattered sparingly in the pews. The choir sat in a set of pews to the left of the pulpit and seemed to be the place for anyone in the congregation under the age of fifty. The rest of the congregation was mostly elderly. In an interview with Baltimore dance ministry director Ava Fields, she referred to United Methodist

---

<sup>130</sup> Reverend Dellyne Hinton, interview by Sydnie Mosley, 1 October 2006.

<sup>131</sup> Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 167.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Reverend Dellyne Hinton, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Baltimore, 1 October 2006.



church members as “lovely snobs.” According to her, “They are well off financially and lovely in their fashion. You know... keepin’ up with the Jones’. It’s image. They are older people, set in their ways. Very bougie.”<sup>134</sup> In worshipping with a United Methodist congregation, I found her comments to be true.

During the service movement in response to music and spoken words was non-existent. The congregation seemed to be most comfortable sitting upright in their seats. The liveliest moments came when the choir moved from their pew section to the area in front of the pulpit. The musical selections were contemporary, and the choir sang forcefully while swaying, tapping feet, clapping, and using the tambourine. In contrast, the older people of the congregation just sat and watched. Every now and again I noticed a person tapping his foot or patting her lap in time with the music. A footnote in the service program requested congregation members to stand and participate “as you are able.” This speaks specifically to the demographics of the church. There was not a lot of movement among the mostly elderly worshippers partly because they physically could not. Still, this note does not explain why most worshippers failed even to sway or clap with the choir. During the sermon, a woman sitting a couple of pews in front of me exemplified emphatic movement. This movement included rocking back and forth, nodding her head, and clapping in agreement with the Word. Her actions were further emphasized by her voice: “Yes!” “No!” and “Mmm hmm.”

Reverend Dellyne Hinton has been pastor of Sharp Street for two years and is the first female pastor to oversee the congregation in its nearly 230 year existence. Among her goals, she is pushing to liven up the worship experience, getting members more involved in the church and in the community outside of the church in order to bring more than just the faithful few to service on Sunday morning. During the Greetings and Announcements part of the service, the contrast

---

<sup>134</sup> Ava Fields, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Baltimore, September 30, 2006.

between the congregation and the pastor was immediately noticeable. While a church member made announcements, Pastor Hinton called out from pulpit, adding comments to the announcements being spoken. Silence or off-guard looks were the only responses.

In an effort to bring new life to the “stale” worship of the congregation, Reverend Hinton pushed the boundaries of traditional liturgy, challenging the norms of her elderly congregation. During her sermon, she moved from the pulpit to the aisles, until she was speaking to the congregation members seated closest to the front, while standing directly next to them. She clearly and intentionally intruded upon the congregation’s space, blurring the lines of spectator and performance. This radical move in such a conventional space was only the first of many changes she was to impose on the congregation. Because it was World Communion Day (the first Sunday in October), she asked that each congregation member after taking his or her own communion at the altar, pick up a small plastic Ziploc bag with a piece of bread and a small container of juice. She then charged each church member to take these sacraments representing them as the body and blood of Jesus Christ and give them as communion to members of the surrounding community who they think have never been to church or have not been into a church in a long time. Additionally, she asked congregation members to pray with those people for their salvation, instructed them to bring the person back to the sanctuary with them. If the person refused, then one should return and give her the person’s name. On top of all this, Reverend Hinton refused to give benediction until church members had completed the task and returned. She told them she would sit and wait for thirty minutes before she closed the service. The older members seemed appalled by her charge, while the younger ones eagerly rushed outside. What seemed to upset them the most, was the fact that she was disturbing the established order of worship. She refused to give the benediction before they walked out the door!

When I spoke with her after the service, Reverend Hinton stated that her mission was to take the congregation out of their comfort zone. According to her, people believe that once they have gone to the church and worshipped, their service is done. However, the fact is that their service has only begun. It is their duty to share the Word of God with others. Moreover, the congregation is set in its ways, and the only way to infuse new life into the church is for the members to go out and bring it in.<sup>135</sup> The fact that my mother and I came to the church of our own accord just to visit was a surprise to people, as they told us during the passing of the peace. As we left, person after person called to us with some version of “Please remember us. Make sure you come back again.”

For the Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist congregation, the lack of movement and participation in the worship service reflects the established habits of long-time church members. Since much of the membership does not live in the immediate vicinity, this was perhaps the first time that they had confronted the old men in wheel chairs across the street in front of the senior housing complex; the derelicts on the street corners; and the lower income families in row houses situated between Sharp Street and the neighboring Bethel A.M.E. Church. Reverend Hinton wanted the congregation to focus on the people they passed walking to and from their cars, and incorporate them into the church’s outreach.

She stated that she was receptive to inviting dance ministries to worship with them and would try to start one at the church if she felt there was someone in the congregation confident enough to direct it and enough youth interested in participating. Her own emphatic movement, shouts from the pulpit, encroachment upon established boundaries with the presence of her body, and willingness to welcome formal dancing into the service, illustrate her desire to shake up the

---

<sup>135</sup> Reverend Dellyne Hinton, interview with Sydnie Mosley, Baltimore, 1 October 2006.

church. While the congregation seems set in its ways, she chooses to ignore the established liturgy, because it leaves no room for growth in people's faith, but is safe and self-interested.

In contrast to Sharp Street, the John Wesley United Methodist Church, which I attended the following week, held a worship service entitled, "The First Annual Celebration: Total Praise Dance Ministry of John Wesley United Methodist Church." The service was entirely conducted through dance. Dance ministries from several different denominations of churches, or individual entities, joined together on the program to conduct devotion. According to Ava Fields, a dance ministry is still extremely new for United Methodist congregations. In this newness, the importance of the dance is lost among rules of what is appropriate for worship:

I'm working right now at John Wesley. They are just coming around to having a dance ministry. I was working with them and told them that the men were to wear blue and the women should wear white and they told me that they can't wear blue. I asked them, "Why?" And they said that blue is not a liturgical color so the pastor won't let us wear it. "Well what are liturgical colors?" They told me "White, red, gold and purple."<sup>136</sup>

For the United Methodists, the prescribed worship that has always been practiced is paramount, and even the incorporation of an all dance worship service cannot entirely move them away from the austere worship they are used to participating in.

Baltimore's black Baptists and United Methodists are mainline churches that continue to follow established worship. Their style of worship does not encourage them to actively serve the immediate community around the churches. The strong command of a pastor or the influx of a religious trend such as liturgical dancing, does not change the core of their worship. The

---

<sup>136</sup> Ava Fields, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Baltimore, September 30, 2006.

livelihood of the congregation is reliant on a set liturgy, which only services the individuals who participate.

## DANCING CONGREGATIONS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

### *African Methodist Episcopal Church: Bethel A.M.E. Church*

In this section I highlight one church denomination that sprang from a mainline tradition but was created by African-Americans specifically for African-Americans. Shortly after the American Revolution, two independent black denominations emerged, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (A.M.E.Z.).<sup>137</sup> Unlike the Baptist and United Methodist churches, which remained under the governance of the Euro-American denominations, and even when they seceded, close to the prescribed liturgy, the A.M.E. and A.M.E.Z. churches formed independent denominational associations, which formulated traditions pertinent to their all-black congregations, while remaining a part of the Methodist tradition.

Richard Allen founded the first A.M.E. church in Philadelphia in 1794. Known initially as the Bethel Church for Negro Methodists, it became the Bethel A.M.E. Church in 1816 when Allen and his followers gained control of their property.<sup>138</sup> The denomination was founded as a place of worship for African Americans who were denied the opportunity to worship as equals in the white Methodist Church. At Allen's previous place of worship, he was appalled to witness a prominent black man removed from his place at the altar because it was reserved for whites.<sup>139</sup> In 1816, pastors from Philadelphia and Attleborough, Pennsylvania, Baltimore, Maryland,

---

<sup>137</sup> Balmer, Butler and Wacker, *Religion in American Life*, 242.

<sup>138</sup> Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 104.

<sup>139</sup> Balmer, Butler and Wacker, *Religion in American Life*, 243.

Wilmington, Delaware, and Salem, New Jersey, banded together to create the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>140</sup> As the denomination developed, branches appeared all over the north and south; worship codified, and the congregation was often made up of members of the respectable black middle class.<sup>141</sup>

At the outset of the formation of the A.M.E. church, Allen modified the Methodist liturgy to be culturally relevant to an African-American congregation. Initially, the services assumed the nature of worship from the slave community. This included dances such as the “ring shout.” However, Richard Allen and later A.M.E. Bishop Daniel Payne were highly critical of bringing this dance with its roots in African ritual into the Methodist Church. Those found to dance the ring shout risked excommunication. Payne spoke about his harsh denunciation of the dance: “The time is at hand when the ministry of the A.M.E. Church must drive out this heathenish mode of worship or drive out all the intelligence, [the] refinement, and practical Christians who may be in her bosom.”<sup>142</sup> For the A.M.E. leadership, the practice of remnants of their members’ African heritage could not exist with, or be practiced by the respectable black middle class membership. Instead, Allen and Payne refined a liturgy and worship style they deemed appropriate for African-Americans. While they certainly drew from Wesley’s Methodist tradition, they created a distinct A.M.E. liturgy, compiling and publishing the first African-American hymnal in 1801.<sup>143</sup> Payne favored a worship style with a unique African-American ethos, heavily influenced by the established Euro-American tradition. Yet, many A.M.E. churches, especially southern ones, assimilated worship elements from the slave heritage into their liturgy.<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 105.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 54.

<sup>143</sup> Costen, *In Spirit and In Truth*, 52.

<sup>144</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 110.

In 1785 the Bethel Church (later A.M.E.) of Baltimore first met for worship.<sup>145</sup> Founder Daniel Payne Coker was a member of Sharp Street United Methodist Church, which at the time was controlled by the Methodist General Conference. Frustrated by white control, Coker and several congregation members withdrew from the church and Methodist conference to form their own congregation.<sup>146</sup> Coker was one of sixteen ministers who along with Allen officially established the A.M.E. denomination. Payne himself presided over the church as pastor in 1847.<sup>147</sup> With his pastorship he expressed his distaste for the African spiritual practices that slaves continued to practice. For instance, he referred to spirituals as “cornfield ditties.”<sup>148</sup> Instead, he preferred instrumental music during worship and stressed the education of his clergy and the congregation.<sup>149</sup>

According to historian Harold McDougall, by 1970 Bethel was a “middle-class church with very few members, and its glory days seemed over.”<sup>150</sup> For a church whose almost 200 year history was not only a popular place of worship, but the core of social and community activism for black Baltimoreans, its 1975 600 person membership was disappointing.<sup>151</sup> It was not until Pastors John and Cecelia Bryant began their thirteen-year ministry in 1975 that new life was infused into the church. The Bryant’s were social and spiritual activists, and during their tenure created programs to motivate the congregation and attract more people to the church. John Bryant had been in the Peace Corps in Liberia, where he came to understand the Holy Spirit in Afrocentric terms. In direct contrast to the foundation laid by Daniel Payne, Bryant encouraged people to raise their hands and shout during the worship service. Considered the father of Neo-

---

<sup>145</sup> Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 63.

<sup>146</sup> Graham, *Baltimore*, 261.

<sup>147</sup> “Bethel History,” <http://www.bethell.org/history.htm>, (16 April 2007).

<sup>148</sup> McDougall, *Black Baltimore*, 123.

<sup>149</sup> “Bethel History,” <http://www.bethell.org/history.htm>, (16 April 2007).

<sup>150</sup> McDougall, *Black Baltimore*, 123.

<sup>151</sup> “Bethel History,” <http://www.bethell.org/history.htm>, (16 April 2007).

Pentecostalism, Bryant revitalized the experiential black traditional worship, which mirrored elements of Pentecostal worship, for the educated middle-class congregation.<sup>152</sup> He also felt that a major way to tap into the Holy Spirit was through service.<sup>153</sup> It was under him that my elementary school, Bethel Christian School, was founded. The church's worship services and all its enterprises, such as the school, emphasized an experiential expression of the Christian faith and an African-American heritage. With this change in focus for the church's ministry and the establishment of multiple outreach organizations, the membership increased to over 3000 members in just three years.<sup>154</sup>

In 1988 the current pastor, Reverend Frank M. Reid III, took over after Bryant was named Bishop. While Reid continued traditions started by Bryant, the focus of his ministry has been effectively managing all the programs Bryant instituted and expanding upon that foundation. With a continually growing membership, Reid has trained new leadership, involved more men in the church, and remained attuned to black Baltimore's social and political interests. The church walks the fine line of catering to its mostly middle class congregation, in which about fifty percent live in the Western Baltimore County suburbs, and serving the lower-income community near Upton where the church has resided since 1911.<sup>155</sup> In the past twenty years, the church has gradually adapted a typically Pentecostal style of worship, including spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues, healing, and miracles.<sup>156</sup> In addition, under Reid, the congregation has come to call itself the "Bethel Nation." With a congregation of means, numerous ministries, and a forerunner in popular trends in worship, the "Bethel Nation" - a name that appears on all their publication

---

<sup>152</sup> Adrienne Gaines, "Revive Us, Precious Lord." *Charisma Magazine Online*. <http://www.charismamag.com/display.php?id=7441> , May 2003.

<sup>153</sup> McDougall, *Black Baltimore*, 123.

<sup>154</sup> "Bethel History," <http://www.bethell.org/history.htm>, (16 April 2007).

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Adrienne Gaines, "Revive Us, Precious Lord." *Charisma Magazine Online*. <http://www.charismamag.com/display.php?id=7441> , May 2003.



materials, television and radio advertisements - certainly sees itself as a preeminent place of worship for African-Americans in Baltimore.

The church's worship service is distinctly marked by the amount of movement and dance in it. I visited the church for a 9:15 a.m. service in October 2006. Throughout the service there is a sign language interpreter, who used not only her hands but also her entire body to express what was said or sung. The choir opened the service and immediately, people popped up out of their seats. Without any prodding or warm-up, people clapped, stamped, and danced as the music moved them: fingers pointed upward toward the sky and clapped their hands way above their heads. During the singing of the Doxology<sup>157</sup> everyone held hands across the church, across pews and aisles, so that we were all connected. On the last phrase of the song "Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost!" everyone raised their chained hands. In both these instances, the movement was ritualized, as if the same movement happens at every service, every week, at these given times. Often ministers directed the congregation: "If you believe, then clap your hands.../ If you believe, then wave your hands." It was as if the only way to express your faith is through moving in these particular ways. In addition, directives were projected on the wall next to the pulpit with phrases such as "Praise God" and "Hallelujah" that the audience responded to, emphasized, and embellished with their own voices and bodies. Peculiar to worship at Bethel, movement was so ingrained into the ritual of worship that the congregation was told and constantly admonished that they should move and how they should do it.

Other formalized movement came from the performance of the women's dance ministry. They performed Motions of Praise (the name given to their segment in the program) to a song entitled "Lift Him Up." The movement was balletic for the most part and included fan kicks, *port*

---

<sup>157</sup> The Doxology is a song commonly sung in African-American worship services. It is "a song of thanksgiving... sung by the congregation as a reminder that God's promise of forgiveness is a gift of grace, for which we are ever grateful." Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 138.

*de bras*, and pirouettes. Yet in contrast to many dance ministries I have watched, the dancers moved with little enthusiasm, just doing the steps and trying to do the choreography correctly (move in the correct direction). When speaking with one of the dancers, Kara Anthony, a senior high school dance major at the Baltimore School for the Arts, she expressed that she only participated in the ministry because she was asked to, given her extensive dance training. At the time, there were separate dance ministries for men, women, and children. Each group varied in age and dance experience. In the women's dance ministry, the lack of experience among dancers affected the performance and was more noticeable than any spiritual intentions of the dance. Regardless of its effectiveness, the ministries regularly perform during Bethel's worship services.<sup>158</sup>

The service also had quite a lot of spontaneous movement. There were extended periods in which a person in the pulpit shouted out phrases such as "Thank You Jesus!" There was also "shouting." Musicians began to play a musical interlude specifically for shouters, distinguished by a steady drum pulse and shaking tambourines. Costen descriptively defines shouting, a black church ritual that extends back to the Invisible Institutions:

Shouting is experienced when the Holy Spirit fills and empowers the worshipers so that they are unable to remain still. Shouting is one way that a person responds to the encounter and movement of the Holy Spirit in worship. The resulting physical involvement has been described as religious ecstasy, or uncontrollable physical movements involving one's whole person. The shouters may stand and dance or jump about involuntarily, or they may remain seated and swing their arms and legs convulsively. African Americans understand this as a special divine moment of happiness and joy during a spontaneous encounter with and enabling

---

<sup>158</sup> Kara Anthony, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Baltimore, 8 October 2006.

of the Holy Spirit. This ecstatic moment may be referred to as “getting happy.”

What happens to cause one to shout must also be understood in the context of one’s psychological and religious orientation, needs, and expectations, as well as the accompanying element(s) of worship (preaching, praying, singing, or the shouting of someone else).<sup>159</sup>

When shouting took place at Bethel, many people in the congregation began to participate, jumping up and down. Those who did not encouraged shouters with claps and stomps. The music, particularly the drumbeat also encouraged them. While some worshippers seemed genuinely moved, others gave the impression that they were dancing simply because it was time to shout. For them, they caught the Holy Spirit right on time, with music to back them up, and an audience to cheer them on. Whether authentic or not, it was clearly important in this worship service that the presence of the Holy Spirit was known through people’s dancing.

Other spontaneous movement was inspired by the sermon of a guest minister. Pastor Reid sat in the background nodding his head in agreement throughout. The sermon invoked a range of reactions from laughter (there became a general raucousness among the congregation) to people jumping in the aisles.

The offering was the last portion of the service. The entire church, from the balconies down to the floor of the church, walked in an orderly fashion to the altar to give their money and then proceeded to leave the church building. This was a surprising end to the service because there was no benediction or warning that this was the end of the service. Considering that it was the second service of the morning with one more to go, and there was a sanctuary full of people with more waiting outside, the movement of people directly out of the building after depositing their money indicated a need to move people in and out of the church in order to accommodate

---

<sup>159</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 48.

the number of Sunday worshippers. It was a business-like transaction; one essentially pays to get their praise. Moreover, the times and number of regular Sunday services has increased from two to three, and has been organized around the worship times of neighboring churches – thus allowing for greater numbers of people to be a part of the Bethel Nation.

Currently, nearly 15,000 people actively take part in Bethel’s worship services by being present with their bodies, and then dancing as directed or spontaneously inspired. This movement is certainly a performance of a new tradition quite different from the type of worship encouraged by the church’s founders.<sup>160</sup> This new tradition is Afrocentric in nature, both reclaiming elements of worship traditionally considered African-American and following the widespread trend of Neo-Pentecostal worship in African-American mainline churches. Without movement in worship services of the nineteenth and early twentieth century A.M.E. leaders, the educated black middle-class congregation remained isolated from the community surrounding its church building. Its membership was low and for the most part uninteresting. Yet under Bryant and Reid’s leadership, they constructed a mega-church based on activism, neo-Pentecostalism, and traditional family values.<sup>161</sup> Once movement became an established part of worship, not only has membership increased, but a gap has been bridged between the congregation and the surrounding communities; people are not just active in their worship, but in the social and political realms immediately affecting Baltimore’s African-American community.

---

<sup>160</sup> Adrienne Gaines, “Revive Us, Precious Lord.” *Charisma Magazine Online*. <http://www.charismamag.com/display.php?id=7441> May 2003.

<sup>161</sup> McDougall, *Black Baltimore*, 126.

*Charismatic Church: Empowerment Temple A.M.E. Church*

Charismatic worship is a fervent trend in mainline churches. While there are numerous non-denominational Charismatic or Neo-Pentecostal<sup>162</sup> churches in Baltimore, analogous to Ghana's Action Chapel and Royal House Chapel International, there are just as many churches that are officially a part of long established denominations, though little about their worship resonates with its history. One such church is the Empowerment Temple A.M.E. Church, founded in 2000 by Bishop John Bryant's son, Jamal-Harrison Bryant. Since its founding, membership has blossomed from forty-two members in his home to 10,000 in an arena in Northwest Baltimore.<sup>163</sup> The Empowerment Temple experience is definitely that of a charismatic mega-church, which appeals primarily to the thirty-five-year-old pastor's generation and those younger. With his flashy charm, provocative sermons, movement-oriented worship services, and an uncanny ability to draw every kind of African-American youth into the church, he is bringing new meaning to the A.M.E. structure.

At a January 2007 worship service, I witnessed the mass movement of people into the church building. People came in droves: young, old, well dressed, in jeans, families, individuals – all with their Bibles in hand. Everything about the set up of the church indicates its mega-church status. The sanctuary is an arena with a large stage functioning as the pulpit. On either side of the pulpit, projection screens hang while a light display flashes on the wall in between them. Two other projectors hang from the ceiling on the left and right sides of the church. The service could also be viewed via live stream on the internet, as well as by broadcast on the popular Christian cable television network, Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).

---

<sup>162</sup> Please refer to page 32 for a detailed description of the theology of Charismatic churches.

<sup>163</sup> Joe Burris, "Feeling Empowered," *Baltimore Sun*. August 6, 2006.

All of the movement taking place within the worship service seemed to be spontaneously inspired. Unlike Bethel, where at times movement seemed to happen for show or because the congregation was told to, worshippers at Empowerment Temple appeared truly touched by the Holy Spirit at all times. Upon entering the church, the men's choir was singing and many in the congregation responded with their arms open and extended upward. During the sermon, there was prolonged standing and clapping. The woman directly in front of me jogged in place for the sermon's entirety, revved up by Reverend Bryant's words. Even with several beckons to "Please be seated," congregation members continued to stand. Worshippers were so touched and filled by what was going on in the service that they could not possibly sit down.

The one moment of organized movement in the service took place during the offering. It was a procession of congregation members around each individual area of seating. It is important to note movement in relation to money because one of the major themes of Reverend Bryant's empowerment theology is financial empowerment. He touts a prosperity gospel while living the "bling bling" life of a hip hop star including driving a Bentley and wearing finely tailored three piece suits on every occasion. He encourages his members to give a minimum \$40 offering at each service, by cash or check in the provided envelope, or online by debit or credit card, so that one day members may be as monetarily prosperous as he. As such, the offering procession was paramount during the service.

The most resonant moment in the service was the altar call, also known as the invitation to discipleship. This takes place after the sermon and is a time for worshippers to join in the Christian faith, renew their discipleship, ask for special prayer, or become a member of the church. Reverend Bryant called out issues that a few individuals were dealing with in the congregation including suicide, abortion, and HIV/AIDS. When the affected individuals came to

the altar they were asked to raise their hands above their heads. In this position they were left vulnerable and open, exposing their physical bodies and their souls. The moment Bryant placed his hands on each individual they fell to the floor. This public spectacle further encouraged the emotional, physical, and vocal response from the congregation including shouting at the top of the lungs, speaking in tongues, crying, and praying out loud.

According to the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper reporter Joe Burris, Bryant often relates his sermons to contemporary concerns:

He quotes from rapper Jay-Z, blares music from rapper Kanye West. He speaks to women who are lacking a man in their lives. He mentions Prozac and talks openly about sex. He insists that your life and faith are relevant no matter who you are.

Then, he stresses ways for individuals to empower themselves by harnessing their uniqueness.<sup>164</sup>

When Bryant directly addresses these issues, people are open to receiving the Holy Spirit, moved to give their lives to Christ and to join the church. The connection he draws between real-life concerns of young African-Americans and their faith resonates with traditional West African theology in which the sacred and secular sectors of one's life are inseparable. Further, just as in traditional African culture where dance is interconnected to all aspects of life and faith, spiritually inspired movement in Empowerment Temple's worship services manifests a bridging of the gap between the sacred and secular parts of one's life. In other words, moving and dancing, such as falling after being touched by the Holy Spirit, is a direct expression of finding and allowing spirituality into one's life.

But the importance of movement in this charismatic church does not end with being "saved," rather it is just beginning. Bryant preaches both personal empowerment and

---

<sup>164</sup> Burris, "Feeling Empowered."

involvement, and has the church set up so that it is involved in every aspect of one's life. Costen writes about the concept of empowerment. African-American empowerment through worship means being spiritually "free" in the face of adversities beyond the space of worship. This spiritual freedom includes prayer, preaching, music, and movement that "express the love and faith of bonded servants at work."<sup>165</sup> She asserts that an empowered gathering evokes the need to go out and serve the community.<sup>166</sup>

Typical of a mega-church, Empowerment Temple has multiple ministries created in God's service. Bryant clearly articulates a need to *empower* his congregation; thus Empowerment Temple firstly nourishes spiritual freedom in the sanctuary through its movement infused worship style, and then sends the congregation forth to develop themselves and Baltimore's African-American community at large. For example, every new member to the church (about 75 each week) is registered to vote, meaning that African-Americans age 18-35, the least participatory yet most influential demographic of voters in Baltimore, are immediately involved in the political arena.<sup>167</sup> Empowerment Temple has a dance ministry among a plethora of other performing arts, social, and economic focused organizations. Just like Bethel, a congregation moving inside the sanctuary is moving outside of it as well.

### *Conclusions*

Since African-American Christian worship initially began in secrecy, denominational restrictions on how to worship did not exist. Rather, communities developed their own styles of worship that merged elements of their African heritage and considered their new situation on American soil. In this context they cultivated their own elements of worship that allowed for a

---

<sup>165</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 120.

<sup>166</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 127-128.

<sup>167</sup> Burris, "Feeling Empowered."



spiritual experience. Costen contends that “modes of expression unique to African American worshippers are imbued with the power to replace some of the enforced political models at the controlling center of society.”<sup>168</sup> In other words, worship modes such as shouting takes worshippers into a freeing place of religious ecstasy, a liminal place beyond the structures of the world, such as slavery. It is in fact a common African American history of oppression in the United States that binds black worship styles across denominations with implicit African views that provide fundamental ways to knowing and experiencing God.

In the 1960s, a movement known as Black Theology arose in churches coinciding with political movements such as Black Power. The idea was to theologize from within the African-American experience, across denominations, so that worship and the goals of churches had an Afrocentric focus.<sup>169</sup> This idea has since developed, and contemporary trendy churches infuse their theological beliefs and worship style with what is not only inherently African, but also uniquely African American, appealing to the sensibilities of the hip-hop generation.

In my observations of the types of movement taking place in traditional black churches as well as Pentecostal and Charismatic influenced churches in Baltimore, there were four major types of movement. There was emphatic movement, suggesting agreement with what is happening in the worship service. This was found across denominations. The next type of movement was the processional or marching movement, taking place mostly at the entrance of the clergy, or by ushers and congregation members during the tithes and offering time.

Dance ministries are the third major means for movement in the worship service. Among African American churches, dance ministries have come to represent a powerful way to minister to the congregation, and a way to involve people in ministry regardless of age and experience.

---

<sup>168</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 79.

<sup>169</sup> Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 17.

The movement used by these ministries varies widely. This was illustrated when I attended John Wesley for their worship service full of dance ministries. For the most part, the movement vocabulary was based on ballet with an emphasis on *port de bras* (movement of the arms), *chaîné* turns (a series of consecutive traveling turns), and large jumps. Other movement styles included mime, sign language, and some pedestrian movement. Overall, the choreography was simple. For example, dancers may split center and dance in opposition, or perform solos in a canon (one right after the next). Moreover, facial expressions and the intent of movement (or lack thereof) contributed significantly to the feeling of the dance.

There did not seem to be a correlation with the type of movement and the church denomination that presented it, rather the extent and depth of the choreography reflected the experience of the group's director and its dancers. For instance, the Ava Fields Dance Ministry, which does not have a denominational affiliation, was one of the most sophisticated dance groups. Fields trained at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore and also with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. This was evident in the dancers' extensive movement vocabulary, including turns and jumps, indicating that they received some technical training. Fields, who says she began the first dance ministry in Baltimore in 1978 at the Howard Park recreation center, finds dance for worship absolutely necessary. She uses it as a Bible teaching tool for the children who dance with her, and understands how movement can effectively communicate to those watching in an audience.<sup>170</sup>

While the choreographed or improvisational movements used by African-American dance ministries may not resonate as African, the idea of the dance ministry does. The fact that John Wesley United Methodist conducts an entire worship service through dance emphasizes the importance of an experiential mode of worship to people of African descent. While the dancers

---

<sup>170</sup> Ava Fields, interview by Sydnie Mosley, Baltimore, September 30, 2006.

in most of the ministries lack virtuosity, what is prized is the emotional intent behind the movement, feeling the spirit, and empowering oneself and others through a corporeal experience.

Responding to a question about the relevance of dancing in church to an African-American experience, Fields says:

Yes, we have to do it. It's like in the Bible when it says "Praise Him with the timbrel and dance." Dance is still in us. Our tie to our heritage is the dance. It's like when the spirit hits people and immediately that's what we do, we dance.

That's our heritage. It all ties in.<sup>171</sup>

The movement resulting from the touch of the Holy Spirit that Fields refers to is the fourth and final type of movement observed in Baltimore's churches. Shouting and falling out to the floor, also known as being "slain in the spirit," was a movement style particular to churches with Neo-Pentecostal worship. This type of movement is uniquely African-American in that its roots extend back to the possession trance of West African traditional religious experience while simultaneously absorbing the context of the once secret worship on plantations, and now the extremely public display of a spiritual experience. In front of crowds of thousands, and at the beck and call of preachers, African-Americans have found in certain churches a place where they can relate the realities of their everyday lives to their faith. When these aspects of their lives converge they dance, though the churches of their parents' generation told them not to. Moreover, they dance the joys and sorrows they feel in a place not of this world, so that when they re-enter it, they are empowered to better serve in His name. Even if the performance of movement is just that, a performance, the reality that African-Americans are recalling their African heritage through a spiritual experience affirms an identity uniquely their own.

---

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

Baltimore's mainline churches, which because of longstanding congregations or other reasons, have maintained a subdued or quietly dignified worship service, tend to be more intimate and self-serving congregations. Yet, those with movement-infused services and congregations of thousands are those with significant community involvement. The concept of moving in church through a physical worship, positively correlates with escalating church membership and social activism. These churches have taken the established liturgy and created an appeal to the next generation of African-Americans, in which simply sitting, standing, and marching as an usher, is not enough to keep them involved in the church. Baltimore's churches that move the most physically in worship, inspire the largest number of individuals in the city's African-American community.

**MOVEMENT FOR WORSHIP IN ACCRA AND BALTIMORE: CULTURAL COMPARISONS,**  
**CONTINUITIES AND DISPARITIES**

This study examines a spectrum of churches in both Accra and Baltimore whose movement for worship reflects varying degrees of traditional African cultural influence. In Accra, all of the churches, regardless of denomination, stray away from the use of traditional sacred movement, since Christianity has shunned it, labeling it fetish and evil. Instead, mainline and African Independent Churches whose worship is distinctly African, incorporate traditional secular movements into their services. In this way, their worship is appropriate to Christianity via its disregard for fetish spirituality, and integrates Ghanaian identity into religious worship. African-American Neo-Pentecostal worship profoundly influences Ghanaian Pentecostal and Charismatic movement for worship.

Across denominations in Baltimore, the worship occurring commonly refers to traditional sacred movement of West African spirituality. Yet, the degree to which this is maintained and encouraged among different denominations depends on varied experiences in African-American history. Black Baptists and United Methodists, are examples of African-American mainline churches whose worship over the course of their histories has limited or somewhat abandoned physical manifestations of traditional African spirituality. On the other end of the spectrum, there are many Baltimore mainline churches that are a part of the contemporary worship trend in Neo-Pentecostalism, which zealously recalls traditional sacred movement through shouting, being slain in the spirit, speaking in tongues etc.

The dynamics of movement for worship in Baltimore and Accra, either reveal characteristics that are specific to some black Christian communities, or illustrate cross-cultural patterns between Africans and African-Americans.

### *Individualized Worship Experiences*

The movement occurring in some black churches in both Accra and Baltimore inhibits a relationship between worshippers and a greater community. For many congregants in these churches, they do not move much either because they are used to a stricter worship environment, or because they are not physically capable due to age. Whether the choice is conscious or unconscious, conventional mainline churches in Accra and Baltimore isolate themselves from either the global community because their worship is highly individualized to the culture, or from their immediate surrounding communities via worship that is self-serving.

By informing their worship with traditional secular dance, Accra's mainline and African Independent Churches illustrate a deep respect for their Ghanaian culture. The denominations are contextualizing their worship, a responsibility that scholar Byang Kato charges African Christians with. The mainline churches are just beginning to incorporate a more Africanist worship style. They are choosing movements from a repertoire of dances, such as the *agbadza* of the Ewe, to celebrate a Ghanaian cultural identity within Christianity. AIC's have always maintained their cultural sense amidst Christian worship. For these churches, Christian symbolism replaces traditional symbolism, while they maintain a similar worship style. These churches are consciously choosing a worship style that reflects a culturally defining historical past, transforming the Christianity that was taught in the missionary and colonial eras. The results, however, are religious entities that cater specifically to themselves. Those most affected by the churches are the existing congregations and the local community members who culturally identify with the church.

Conventional African-American mainline church congregations in Baltimore that have controlled, suppressed, or abandoned elements of traditional sacred movement, sustain a self-

serving worship service in a much different way. While I believe that this is a trend mostly of the older, long established churches, these congregations curb themselves and their influence on their surrounding communities, since worship with limited or little movement is not one that attracts many people into the church in today's society. Perhaps worshippers in these institutions are unconscious that their worship is uninviting. Yet there are those such as Reverend Hinton, who try to bridge the disparities between the church and the neighborhood in which it resides. On the contrary, First Baptist actively forges relationships with the surrounding community; however, the sometimes conservative worship fails to maintain the interest of a large number of new church members. Churches that lack a relationship with their neighborhoods also have a limited influence on the greater African-American community in Baltimore. Instead, worship services continue on as they always have for congregation members, because it is comfortable for them.

### *Globalization, Cultural Continuity and Cross-cultural Comparisons*

According to scholar Richard Schechner, globalization is “the increasing interconnection and interdependency of economic, social, cultural, technical, and ideological systems.”<sup>172</sup> With its roots in enduring colonial and imperialist connections established between world cultures, trends in Christian worship such as Neo-Pentecostalism are easily transmitted in our increasingly global society aided by media and technology, in addition to human contact. Emerging in the 1960s, Neo-Pentecostal worship easily lends itself to being a form of world Christianity because of its comprehensive theology that infuses faith and service into all aspects of one's life. For churches in Accra and Baltimore that are a part of the global Neo-Pentecostal movement, there is both an unconscious circulation of traditional sacred worship, and a conscious circulation of

---

<sup>172</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 226.

contemporary worship, which garners common benefits and criticisms to the black Christian communities.

Pentecostal and Charismatic Ghanaians are the denominations most fiercely resisting the use of any sort of traditional Ghanaian movement in their worship. Yet, they are unconsciously practicing a traditional sacred worship by appropriating movement from Neo-Pentecostal worship among African-American churches of the United States. Movement forms ultimately circulated into Ghanaian churches are certainly distilled. They have been transformed by the slave experience, the subsequent African-American experience, and then again by a contemporary Ghanaian experience. According to Abamfo Atiemo, “Practices like clapping of hands, drumming and dancing aside, speaking in tongues and prophesying in ecstasy which are common with charismatics have some similarities with ‘spirit possession’ in African Traditional Religions.”<sup>173</sup>

Among the Ghanaian Charismatic churches I visited, the worship was practically the same as African-American worship in churches such as Empowerment Temple. The African-American tradition of shouting, for example, now occurs in Ghanaian Charismatic churches.<sup>174</sup> When one shouts, the Holy Spirit possesses the worshipper, just as any given deity would possess a worshipper in African traditional religion. The dance performed by the possessed in either Christianity, or African traditional religion is the “height of the rite, the greatest evidence of the presence of the deity in the service.”<sup>175</sup> Ghanaian shouters then, in essence, refer back to their own traditional spirituality by adopting an African-American tradition. This cultural exchange is ironic, because Ghanaian Pentecostals and Charismatics ardently shun their own

---

<sup>173</sup> Abamfo Atiemo, *The Rise of the Charismatic Movement in the Mainline Churches in Ghana* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1993), 42.

<sup>174</sup> Ishmael Adjetey Osekre, interview by Sydnie Mosley, New York, 20 April 2007.

<sup>175</sup> Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 14.



traditional spirituality in light of assimilating to a Western style of worship. Yet unknowingly, their traditional spirituality has reemerged in this newfound worship.

Reference to a West African traditional sacred worship attracts hundreds of worshippers each year into African-American Neo-Pentecostal churches, such as the A.M.E. churches observed in Baltimore. In both Accra and Baltimore, church clergy recognize that their physically active styles of worship invite and keep people involved in church. The worship is accessible to a youth population because it responds to popular culture. Youths bring in their parents and other older relatives, harvesting large congregations with black people of all ages and types. This reverberates throughout Baltimore's African-American community, because not only are a growing number of African-Americans saved, but they become active participants in improving the social, economic, and political life of the community. These large, influential congregations make the churches necessary public relations sites for campaigning political leaders in the city. For example, when I visited Bethel I was greeted at the door by Michael Steele, the black Republican candidate for Maryland State Senate.

Neo-Pentecostal churches characterized by their lively movement, often find themselves at the intersection of popular culture and religion. Once people are saved, churches encourage people to dance in the church rather than in nightclubs. At Royal House Chapel International in Accra, there are midnight services on Saturday nights featuring praise and worship singers and the United Young Dancers. While Reverend Bryant does not offer midnight services, when he began the church, he had a street team who passed out flyers to people after nightclubs closed or concerts finished, encouraging them to come to church on Sunday morning.<sup>176</sup>

Moreover, while this style of worship certainly serves the local population who are now integrating their secular life with their sacred, the church institutions and the clergy that lead

---

<sup>176</sup> Burris, "Feeling Empowered."

them continuously walk a fine line between Christianity and a secular popular culture that many critics find un-Godly. Prosperity gospel theology elicits a lot of this criticism because of the luxury lifestyle many Charismatic preachers lead. The congregations' financial contribution toward the churches and its preachers is often marked by a triumphant march down the aisles of the church. Yet the benefits of the contributions are more commonly reaped in brand new or expanded church buildings, than in Christian individuals' financial lives.

What is also imported into Ghana, through the far-reaching nature of Neo-Pentecostal worship besides the recollection of a West African traditional spirituality, are liturgical dance ministries, whose movements are not necessarily African based. Rather, these ministries (as they are called in the United States) and choreography groups (as they are called in Ghana) follow an historical struggle of dance for worship among Christians in the Western world. The conscious decision to include formalized dance into the church, reaps common benefits to Accra and Baltimore's churches, targeting a youth culture, retaining membership, and involving people in evangelical ministry.

Historically, for Euro-American Christians, dance has been deemed inappropriate for worship. Rather, Euro-American Christianity places tremendous importance on literature since the basis of the faith is the Bible, commonly referred to as the Word. In addition, preaching is normally considered the main event of the worship service. As already explained, dancing, singing and other performance modes are primary in traditional African religion. The resulting merger of the combined Western Christianity and Afro-centric worship is a performance of the verbal. Among Ghanaian choreography groups and Baltimore dance ministries, dancing to the lyrics occurs with this specific intent. If the movements literally interpret the lyrics, one is able to

emphasize the message of the song. The hope is that, a spectator will clearly understand the message, receiving the Word of God, and possibly take part in the praise and worship.

In my interviews with members and directors of dance ministries, there is an understanding that the body carries great importance as a tool of evangelism. Yet, in all of the dance groups I observed, few were technically virtuous in either Western or Ghanaian movement styles. Everyone was welcomed regardless of age, shape, size, and levels of dance training. What is seen as virtuous for them is the emotional, physical, and spiritual intent behind the movement. The philosophy boasted by most of these groups is that they dance in order “to win souls to the church.”<sup>177</sup>

Dance communicates what words cannot express; movements illustrate identity and unspoken cross-cultural connections. There are many African-American Christians who are totally unaware of how their worship relates to an African heritage, or even contemporary African Christianity. In a society that still portrays Africa as a far away place of impoverished people living in huts, many African-Americans do not even recognize the prevalence of Christianity in Africa. There are even people who refuse to call themselves African-American because they claim they know nothing about Africa. Yet the way that they move in worship demonstrates otherwise. Their movements recall ancestral experiences in indigenous African religions. Conversely, Ghanaians are keenly aware of the African-American worship experience. While some choose to ignore it and inform their worship with traditional music and dance, many other Ghanaians watch American televangelists and imitate mega-church worship. They fail to realize, however, that their adaptation of African-American worship recalls their own religious beginnings.

---

<sup>177</sup> Kofi Gademeh, interview with Sydnie Mosley, Accra, 25 April 2006.

By observing movement among black Christians, I discovered that they are facing similar struggles and triumphs in their churches on each side of the Atlantic. Baltimoreans and Ghanaians are both reconciling a specific history with present social issues. Knowing this could certainly provide a sense of agency, pride, and heritage for Ghanaians and African-Americans alike.

## CONCLUSION

This project began over a year ago, in an effort to understand movements I witnessed and participated in, as a part of black Christian worship. I spent a lot of time observing, interviewing, and even dancing in Baltimore and Accra's churches, in order to understand why African-Americans and Africans dance in church, and why they move in the particular ways they do. Aside from reasons established throughout this paper which include: developing and maintaining a congregation, following global trends in Christian worship, and an underlying cultural necessity for experiential worship, I found that dance within black churches tells the congregants' stories.

The black experience, some would argue, has always been marked by struggles, notably slavery, for African-Americans, and colonialism, for Africans. Faith and religious worship were tools for survival. When black people resort to worship during a difficult time, they want to feel their burden lifted and transcend their adversities. Therefore, Sunday worship is an important ritual for renewal. In this study, black dancing bodies in Accra and Baltimore churches demonstrated spiritual experiences, traits of their individual cultures, and a relationship via a common African heritage.

“The genius of black worship is its openness to the creative power of God that frees and enables people, regardless of denomination, to ‘turn themselves loose’ and celebrate God’s act in Jesus Christ.”<sup>178</sup> This black worship is infused with an undeniable physicality that not only celebrates a faith, but speaks to the innovativeness of Africans and African-Americans; their distinct ability to make Christianity and its methods of praise, their own. Performing their own movement gives them the opportunity to celebrate life, freedom, themselves, and others in the Diaspora community.

---

<sup>178</sup> Costen. *African American Christian Worship*, 77.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Baltimore’s African American Heritage and Attractions Guide: Religious Venues”  
<http://www.baltimore.org/africanamerican/index.htm> (20 September 2006).

“Baltimore’s Historical Black Churches.”  
<http://www.nathanielturner.com/baltimoreblackchurches.htm> (20 September 2006).

“Bethel History.” *Bethel A.M.E. Church*. <http://www.bethel1.org/history.htm> (16 April 2007).

“Megachurch definition,” *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*.  
<http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html> (8 March 2007).

*African Methodist Episcopal Church*. <http://www.ame-church.com/index.php> (16 April 2007).

*Holy Bible*. King James Version.

*The Church in the Southern Black Community*. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/texts.html> (20 September 2006).

*Traditional Dances for Worship Among Christians: the Gospel in Dances*. Efua Sutherland Drama Studio, dir. Seth Newman, 2003, videotape.

*Pulpit Pimps*. [www.pulpit-pimps.org](http://www.pulpit-pimps.org) (16 April 2007).

Agordoh, A.A. “The Influence of African American Religious Music Models on the Ghanaian Church,” *Resound: A Quarterly of the Archives of Traditional Music*: Vol. 23, No. ¾ (July/Oct. 2004): 1-9.

Agordoh, A.A. *Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana and her musical tradition*. Madina, Accra: Royal Crown Printing Press, 2004.

Agordoh, A.A. *Music in Christian Worship: A comparative study of the musical traditions of the older mission churches and the new churches in Ghana*. Ph.D. Thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, 1997.

Archdiocese of Baltimore, Md. Office of African American Ministries. *What we have seen and heard: essays and stories from Black Catholics of Baltimore*. Baltimore: Cathedral Press, 2005.

Atiemo, Abamfo. *The Rise of the Charismatic Movement in the Mainline Churches in Ghana*. Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1993.

Balmer, Randall, Jon Butler and Grant Wacker. *Religion in American Life: A Short History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Barber, Karen. “Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa.” *Africa* 67.3 (1997): 347-362.

- Barber, Karin ed. *Readings in African Popular Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Battle, Michael. *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- Burris, Joe. "Feeling Empowered." *Baltimore Sun*. 6 August 2006.
- Burris, Joe "Seed Offerings Sprout at Churches." *Baltimore Sun*. 3 December 2006.
- Costen, Melva Wilson. *African American Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.
- Costen, Melva Wilson. *In Spirit and In Truth: the Music of African American Worship*. Louisville: Westminster Hohn Knox Press, 2004.
- Cox, Harvey. *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995.
- Daniel, Marilyn. *The Dance in Christianity*. New York: Paulist Press, 1981.
- Davies, J.G. *Liturgical Dance: An Historical, Theological and Practical Handbook*. London: SCM Press, 1984.
- Desmond, Jane C. "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies." *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latino/a America*. Eds. Celeste Delgado and José Muñoz. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Elam Jr., Harry J. and David Krasner, eds. *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Falola, Toyin, and Steven J. Salm. *Culture and Customs of Ghana*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Fisher, Robert B. *West African Religious Traditions: Focus on the Akan of Ghana*. New York: Orbis Books, 1998.
- Frey, Sylvia, and Betty Wood. *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.
- Gaines, Adrienne. "Revive Us, Precious Lord." *Charisma Magazine Online*, May 2003. <http://www.charismamag.com/display.php?id=7441> (16 April 2007).
- Gifford, Paul. *African Christianity: Its Public Role*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998.

- Gifford, Paul. *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentacostalism In a Globalizing African Economy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Graham, Leroy. *Baltimore, the Nineteenth Century Black Capital*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of American, 1982.
- Herskovits, Melville J. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. New York: Harper, 1941.
- Kato, Byang H. *Biblical Christianity in Africa: Theological Perspectives in Africa*. Achimoto, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1985.
- Meyer, Birgit. "Praise the Lord': Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere." *American Ethnologist* (2003): 92-110.
- Mitchell, Henry. *Black Church Beginnings: The Long Hidden Realities of the First Years*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- Morrow, Diane Batts. *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Newman, Seth. "Dance in African Worship." *In Step* (August 1994): 12-13.
- Newman, Seth. "To be African is to Dance." *Horizons* (March/April 2003): 27-28.
- Phillips, C.H. *The History of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America*. New York: Arno Press, 1972.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Shillington, Kevin. *History of Africa*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Snipe, Tracy D. "African Dance: Bridges to Humanity." *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, Ed. Kariamuwelsh Asante. Trenton: African World Press, 1996.
- St. Francis Xavier Church (Baltimore, MD). *Historic St. Francis Xavier Church: 1501 E. Oliver Street, Baltimore, MD 21213*. Matthews, N.C.: PCA International, 1993.
- St. James First African Church (Baltimore, MD) *St. James Church, Baltimore, Maryland, 1824-1949*. Baltimore: 1949.
- Stuckey, Sterling P. "Christian Conversion and Dance." *Dancing Many Drums*. Ed. Thomas DeFrantz. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. "An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance." *African Forum* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1966): 85-102.



Tiénou, Tite. *The Theological task of the Church in Africa: Theological Perspectives in Africa*. Achimoto, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1982.

Tyson, Joseph V. *What We've Heard—What We've Seen: St. Peter Claver Roman Catholic Church Centennial Journal*. Baltimore: The Church, 1988.

Usry, Glenn, and Craig S. Keener. *Black Man's Religion: Can Christianity be Afrocentric?* Downers' Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996.

Warnick, Kristen *Influences on Contemporary Ghanaian Dance: An Exploration on Viewpoints*. (University of Oregon) SIT: Ghana Arts and Culture Program, Spring 2000.

Weatherford, W.D. *American Churches and the Negro: From Slave Days to the Present*. Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1957

Weisenfeld, Judith. "Truths That Liberate the Soul: Eva Jessye and the Politics of Religious Performance." *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, Eds.R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Williams, Melvin D. *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church: An Anthropological Study*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974.

## INTERVIEWS

Adjetei, Klufu Lesley. Member, Ghana Dance Ensemble, University of Ghana, Legon. 26 April 2006.

Afortude, Frederick. Member of Apostles Revelation Society, Madina, Accra, 30 April 2006.

Agordoh, A. A. Director of Music and Dance, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, April 2006.

Ajayku, Steven. Member, Christian Dance Fellowship, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Madina, 9 April 2006.

Anthony, Kara. Member, Bethel A.M.E. Church, Women's Dance Ministry, Baltimore, 8 October 2006.

Asare, Richard "Individual." Senior BFA Dance Candidate, School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon, 19 April 2006.

Atsu, Gasko. Music and Drumming Teacher, School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon, 20 April 2006.

Crosby, Jill Flanders. Visiting Professor of Dance, School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon, 12 April, 19 April, 26 April 2006.

Christian Dance Fellowship, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Madina. Members of the Dance Ministry. 12 April, 19 April, 26 April, 3 May 2006.

Amoah, Obiri. 35 years old. Member more than 10 years.

Ahiataku, Richmond Eddie. 30 years old. Member 2 years.

Botchway, Richard. 18 years old. Member 1 month.

Boateug, Cynthia. 22 years old. Member 2 years.

Sebuabe, Rejoice. 22 years old. Member 4 years.

Agyekum-Amfo, Beatrice. 19 years old. Member 3 months.

Fields, Ava. Director of Ava Fields' Dance Ministry, Baltimore, 30 September 2006.

Gademeh, Kofi. Director of Hayor Dance Company, Director of United Young Dancers, Royal House Chapel International Church, Kaneshie, Accra, 25 April 2006.

Hinton, Rev. Dellyne. Pastor of Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church, Baltimore, 8 October 2006.

Kpodo, Isaac Hoakpe. Director of Music, Apostles Revelation Society, Accra, 30 April 2006.

Laryea, Gifty Naadu. Member, Ghana Dance Ensemble, University of Ghana, Legon, 20 April and 26 April 2006.

Newman, Seth. Professor of Dance, School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana, Legon. 13 April 2006.

Osei, Frances. Member Christian Action Faith Ministry, Accra, 1 May 2006.

Osekre, Ishmael Adjetey. Columbia University student, New York, 20 April 2007.

Parks, Frances. Member, First Baptist Church, Baltimore, 5 November 2006, 21 April 2007.

Stovall, Elizabeth. [estovall@colby.edu](mailto:estovall@colby.edu), "Twelve Apostles Church." personal email (13 March 2007).

Taylor, Rose. Homestay Mother, School of International Training, Accra, 16 April 2006.

United Young Dancers, Royal Chapel International Church. Members of the Dance Ministry. 23 April, 27 April, 30 April, 1 May, 2 May 2006.

Demide, Nathalie Mawuli. 17 years old. Member almost 1 year.

Rasmans, Sara. 19 years old. Member 7 years.