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Article

# Pentecostal Forms across Religious Divides: Media, Publicity, and the Limits of an Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism

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**Abstract:** Scholars of Pentecostalism have usually studied people who embrace it, but rarely those who do not. I suggest that the study of global Pentecostalism should not limit itself to Pentecostal churches and movements and people who consider themselves Pentecostal. It should include the repercussions of Pentecostal ideas and forms outside Pentecostalism: on non-Pentecostal and non-Christian religions, on popular cultural forms, and on what counts as ‘religion’ or ‘being religious’. Based on my ethnographic study of a charismatic-Pentecostal mega-church and a neo-traditional African religious movement in Ghana, I argue that neo-Pentecostalism, due to its strong and mass-mediated public presence, provides a powerful model for the public representation of religion in general, and some of its forms are being adopted by non-Pentecostal and non-Christian groups, including the militantly anti-Pentecostal Afrikania Mission. Instead of treating neo-Pentecostal and neo-traditionalist revival as distinct religious phenomena, I propose to take seriously their intertwinement in a single religious field and argue that one cannot sufficiently understand the rise of new religious movements without understanding how they influence each other, borrow from each other, and define themselves vis-à-vis each other. This has consequences for how we conceive of the study of Pentecostalism and how we define its object.

**Keywords:** charismatic Pentecostalism; African traditional religion; media; publicity; interreligious dynamics; Ghana

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## 1. Introduction

The study of global Pentecostalism, if we choose to speak of such a field, has focused on Pentecostals. Scholars of Pentecostalism have usually studied people who embrace it and belong to it, but rarely those who do not subscribe to it or explicitly reject it. This article presents some material from my ethnographic study of a charismatic mega-church and a neo-traditional religious movement in Ghana and their media practices (De Witte 2008) to reflect on the possibilities and limits of ‘global Pentecostalism’ as a distinct field of study. It argues that the increased mass mediation of religion complicates such a framing and compels us to widen our scope beyond Pentecostal churches, movements, and people.

My study, which was part of a larger research project on religion and modern mass media in post-colonial societies,<sup>1</sup> concerned the public manifestation of religion in contemporary Ghana, where the synergy of mass media, commerce and democracy has generated and enabled new religious

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on more than fifteen years of close observation of charismatic Pentecostalism in Ghana, including intensive ethnographic fieldwork with the International Central Gospel Church in Accra from July to September 2001 and from March 2002 to March 2003 and repeated return visits since.

forms. In Ghana, as in many other African countries, the liberalisation of the media in the nineties has produced a new religious environment that is characterised by politics of representation and othering. In this environment, I investigated the interrelationships between two mass-mediated forms of religion that are at first sight at opposed ends of Ghana's religious landscape, but on closer inspection show remarkable overlaps. The first is the audiovisual culture of 'charismatic Pentecostalism,' with Mensa Otabil's International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) and its 'media ministry' as a case study. The second is the public representation of 'African Traditional Religion' (ATR) by the neo-traditional Afrikania Mission (Afrikania). Taking as a point of departure that one cannot sufficiently understand the rise of new religious movements without understanding how they influence each other, borrow from each other, and define themselves vis-à-vis each other, I examined the paradoxical dynamics between charismatic-Pentecostal revival and traditionalist revival in Ghana and the role of the increasing mass mediation of religion in these dynamics. I discovered that, due to its strong and mass-mediated public presence, neo-Pentecostalism has provided a powerful model for the public representation of religion in general, and that some of its forms are being appropriated by other religious groups seeking publicity and public recognition, including the militantly anti-Pentecostal Afrikania Mission. The mass mediation of Pentecostalism, and of other religions, thus has consequences for how we conceive of the study of Pentecostalism and how we define its object.

Although the category of 'Pentecostalism' is a meaningful one, in defining and delimiting our field of study, we should be wary not to uncritically reproduce religious self-categorisations and boundary setting. Both 'African traditional religion' and 'charismatic Pentecostalism' are academic constructs to a comparable degree. This is well recognised and problematized for African traditional religion, but much less so for (charismatic) Pentecostalism (Droogers 2001, p. 46). Like African traditional religion, Pentecostalism lacks a central organising architecture and encompasses a wide variety of different types of Pentecostal churches and groups, and an equally wide variety of different doctrines, practices, styles, and moralities. Both designations are also used by leaders and adherents of these 'religions' themselves, but this does not mean that we can take them for granted. The usage of such terminology for self-categorisation and consolidation of religious identities forms part of religious groups' struggles for and over public presence and recognition and is thus inherently political. We should thus take into account that the definition of 'Pentecostalism' is never only a theoretical problem, but is intimately bound up with the negotiations by religious adherents themselves over what/who is Pentecostal and what/who is not. By interrogating such self-definitions and asserted religious boundaries, instead of reproducing them in defining our research subject, we are better positioned to analyse these struggles and disagreements as part of a broader politics of self-representation and religious authentication.

## 2. 'Charismatic Pentecostalism' and 'African Traditional Religion': Beyond Compartmentalisation

My choice for studying 'Charismatic Pentecostalism' and 'African Traditional Religion' together grew out of a certain discontent, although at the time not so consciously defined, with an anthropology of Pentecostalism/Christianity that remained too close to Christians' own emphasis on religious difference to account for the interreligious dynamics and relationships that interested me. I thus choose to frame my project not as a study of 'two religions' in Ghana, but as a study of religion as it manifests within and across the frameworks set up by two religious organisations in Ghana's religious field. Official and popular representations of 'religions in Ghana' (e.g., population censuses, school books, info sheets, tourist guides) generally slice up Ghana's diverse and volatile religious field into the categories of 'Christianity', 'Islam', 'African traditional religion', and 'other'. Sometimes the category of 'Christian' is further subdivided into 'Roman Catholic', 'Anglican', 'Presbyterian', 'Methodist', 'spiritualist', 'Pentecostal/charismatic', and 'other denominations'. The Population and Housing Census of 2000 (Ghana Statistical Service 2002) for the first time had a separate entry for 'charismatic and Pentecostal', indicating that charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity had by then become recognised as mainstream. According to the latest population figures (Ghana Statistical Service 2012), Christians make up 71.2 percent of the population, Muslims 17.6 percent, followers of African

Traditional Religion 5.2 percent, and others 6.1 percent.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, with 28.3 percent of the total population and over half of all Christians in Greater Accra regarding themselves as Pentecostal/charismatic, Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity has become the largest religious orientation in Ghana.

This neat categorisation of people into religious tick-boxes forms part of the dominant discourse, which people of various religious affiliations also use to categorise themselves (in fact, the census is based on self-categorisation). In practice, however, the boundaries between different religious categories are not all that rigid. People's religious itineraries involve moving back and forth, and dual or multiple affiliations. Religious practice may vary according to context or specific needs. Religious identification or practice differs between the public and the private realm. Census taking or Sunday worship clearly belong to the former, while visiting a shrine for spiritual consultation and healing is often kept strictly secret. It may not be understood as 'religion' at all, and even less as 'religious affiliation.' This is common knowledge among scholars of religion in Africa (and elsewhere). And yet, even if they take the plurality of religious fields into account, they mostly take as their object of study one 'religion', 'religious group', or 'religious movement'. With some notable exceptions (e.g., [Peel 2016](#); [Werbnner 2011](#)), scholars of religion, like the people they study, also group themselves into distinct academic communities—Islamic studies, Pentecostal studies—focussing on single religious traditions. Recent work from the anthropology of religion in Africa suggests new directions beyond such compartmentalisation and offers productive frameworks for analysing religious encounters, cohabitation, and entanglement in single religious fields ([Janson and Meyer 2016](#); [Larkin 2016](#); [Larkin and Meyer 2006](#); [Soares 2006](#); [Peel 2000, 2016](#)). On the whole, however, a labour division structured by difference and distinction between 'religions' still dominates scholarship on religion, including the burgeoning field of (global) Pentecostalism.

The spectacular rise of neo-Pentecostal or charismatic churches has been considered the most significant phenomenon in the history of Christianity in Ghana ([Asamoah-Gyadu 2005](#); [Gifford 2004](#); [Meyer 2004a](#)), Africa ([Anderson 2002](#); [Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001](#); [Gifford 1998](#); [Kalu 2008](#); [Meyer 2004b](#)), and worldwide ([Anderson 2004](#); [Coleman 2000](#); [Martin 2002](#); [Robbins 2004](#)). This neo-Pentecostal boom, starting in the late seventies and peaking in the nineties, has been accompanied by an equally exponential growth of a body of scholarly work dedicated to understanding and explaining it. This scholarship, Matthew [Engelke \(2010\)](#) suggests, has tended to ascribe to Pentecostalism an exclusive urgency that echoes Pentecostalism's own 'loud and domineering' self-presentations, (implicitly) claiming that if one seeks to understand Christianity (or even religion) in the world today one needs to study Pentecostal churches. It may seem too obvious to state that Pentecostal studies have focused on Pentecostals. They have examined the influence, effects, and significance of conversion to Pentecostalism, and the tensions produced in converts' lives and in the wider social and cultural realms. Those who study Pentecostalism have thus studied the people who embrace it and belong to it, but not those who do not belong, who do not subscribe to it.

I suggest that the study of global Pentecostalism should not remain limited to investigating Pentecostal churches and movements, and people who consider themselves Pentecostal. It should equally take into account the ways in which Pentecostal and charismatic ideas and forms have their repercussions outside Pentecostalism, on non-Pentecostal and non-Christian religions ([De Witte 2015](#)), on broader popular cultural forms ([Meyer 2004a](#)), and on what counts as 'religion' or 'being religious'. The entanglement of Pentecostalism and mass media plays a crucial role here. One of the most significant things about the new mass-mediated form of Pentecostalism is that it does not remain within the boundaries of the particular churches that produce it and their communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Census figures tend to attract much controversy as both Muslims and traditionalists contest the outcome of the census, claiming that the figures for the number of Muslims and traditionalists are far under-reported. Public outcries over census documents not only point to the difficulties involved in categorisation and gathering statistics, but stand at the heart of the struggle over the public representation of religion.

Charismatic Pentecostalism's extensive media production and powerful audiovisual presence in the public sphere have produced and circulated paradigmatic formats for the public representation of religion that influence the styles of public performance and media representation adopted by other religious groups (De Witte 2005). Some recent work on Islam in Africa has hinted at the impact of Pentecostal styles and televangelism on Islamic movements and their media use (Larkin 2008; Schulz 2006) and suggested new analytical frameworks for studying Christian–Muslim encounters and entanglements (Janson and Meyer 2016; Larkin 2016; Soares 2006). While this work resonates with my own work on Pentecostal–ATR encounters and offers fruitful connection points (to which I will return below), African traditional religions have generally been placed outside the realms of public representation, media, and globalisation (but see Chidester 2008), and hence, outside the influence of mass-media Christianity.

In the field of African studies, interesting historical-anthropological work on Christianity has been done that generally has been more sensitive than the newer field of Pentecostal studies to the historical interaction between indigenous religious traditions and globalised forms of Christianity (for overviews see Fernandez 1978; Meyer 2004b; Ranger 1986). Studies of older Pentecostal groups and African Independent Churches have thus paid much attention to traditional religiosity and the issue of 'Africanisation', both 'from above' and 'from below.' Studies of the newer charismatic-Pentecostal churches have also noted continuities with traditional religiosity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Gifford 2004; Kalu 2008), but have on the whole tended to stress these churches' indebtedness to global Pentecostal networks more than to indigenous religious traditions. Apparently, charismatic Pentecostalism's strong global inclination seems to absorb researchers' full attention.

Conversely, in studies of traditional religions and neo-traditionalist movements in Africa, attention has been paid to the presence of Christianity, but most studies of traditional religion are ethnographies of relatively closed, rural communities. As Birgit Meyer has observed in her survey of literature on Christianity in Africa, 'it seems that a sophisticated treatment of African religious traditions in relation to Christianity is still relatively scarce' (Meyer 2004b, p. 455). African charismatic Pentecostalism and African traditional religions are thus rarely studied together on an equal basis, without treating one as the other's 'context'. The fact that charismatic churches and traditionalists' groups appear so intrinsically different in terms of religious doctrines, practices, and outlook, and that they assertively position themselves as each other's opposites, seems to have fuelled researchers' foci on single religious groups and their self-compartmentalisation into sub-disciplines structured by religious boundaries and difference.

I suggest taking seriously, however, the inextricable intertwinement of charismatic Pentecostalism and (neo-)traditional African religion as part of one religious field with a shared history and partly overlapping audiences and examining the complex dynamics between them. The point is not only that African charismatic Pentecostalism, as part of a global religious movement, cannot be studied outside the local contexts in which it is lived and practised and upon whose broader cultural dynamics it spreads and grows. The point is also that African traditional religion, generally understood as 'local', must equally be studied as part of the historical globalisation of religion (Chidester 1996; De Witte 2010a; Ranger 1988; Shaw 1990). Just as Ghanaian charismatic Pentecostalism, despite the 'complete break with the past' it requires (Meyer 1998) and the very real changes it produces (Robbins 2007), shows remarkable continuities with traditional religion, neo-traditional reformulations of African traditional religion often show remarkable continuities with Christianity, despite their explicit rejection of Christianity (De Witte 2012).

This is not to question the sincerity of Ghanaian charismatics' claims of being 'born again,' of making 'a complete break with the past,' nor to argue that they are 'still' caught up in traditional religious worldviews. Neither is it to argue that Afrikania's claims to continuity with African traditional religions are false since Afrikania shows more continuity with Christianity, and thus Afrikans are 'actually' Christians (although, in fact, most of the leaders of the movement are ex-Catholics who converted to African Traditional Religion). As much as I welcome Joel Robbins (2010)

call for investigating the distinctive features of 'Pentecostal culture', a strong emphasis on rupture (Robbins 2007; 2010) risks reinforcing the asserted boundaries between Pentecostalism and other religions instead of interrogating them. Surely, people's own assertions of break, boundaries, and radical change are to be taken seriously if we want to understand what becoming and being Christian or traditionalist is all about. However, we cannot take them for granted as analytic descriptions of distinct and bounded religious groups. We should take them for what they are: assertions, claims and (conversion) narratives that are part and parcel of the religious culture people belong to or wish to belong to, that is, of the interreligious dynamics that includes a politics of self-representation and authentication. Such 'anti-syncretism', as Shaw and Stewart (1994) have termed the antagonism shown by religious agents to processes of synthesis, is often concerned with the defence of religious boundaries and purity. As claims to religious identity and authenticity, assertions of difference are also contested by others in the religious playing field: Afrikanians claim that born-again Christians are fake, that they only pretend to be possessed by the Holy Spirit, but that 'real power' is with the traditional priests; traditional shrine priests suspect Afrikania of being Christianity in disguise; born-again Christians critique mainline Christians for being superficial and say that 'they are not real Christians'; and some Catholics do not take the traditionalist escapades of their walk-away-priest seriously, because 'once a Catholic always a Catholic.' The point is that charismatic Christian and traditionalist leaders operate and manifest themselves in a single religious arena, in which they seek to convince widely overlapping audiences of their claims to authority and authenticity.

A dual focus on these two manifestations of religion in Ghana reveals the paradoxical dynamics at work in the relation between them: as I will show in what follows, in opposing each other, the Afrikania Mission and charismatic Pentecostalism also become like each other. African charismatic-Pentecostal churches 'fight' against traditional religion, yet implicitly incorporate the logic, spiritual forces, and ways of worship of local religious traditions as media through which Christian spirituality is communicated. The Afrikania Mission 'fights' (charismatic) Christianity, yet adopts Christian formats in its reformulation of 'African Traditional Religion'. The entanglement of religion and mass media reinforces these dialectics. On the one hand, the growing public presence of religion extrapolates the antagonism. Religion increasingly becomes a site of public clash (Hackett 1999), especially between Pentecostals and traditionalists. At the same time, religious mass media generate and disseminate similar religious formats that have a cross-religious impact on the public representation of religion. Charismatic Pentecostalism, being the dominant and most publicly present religion, has become the template for religion as such and, surprisingly, also for Afrikania's public representations.

While the importance of mass media is well recognised in the literature on African charismatic Pentecostalism, media have mostly been treated as 'a feature' of charismatic churches, as one of their distinctive 'characteristics.' In my work I have taken up the question of media and publicity as its central problematic (De Witte 2010b). Exactly this problematic, I argue, complicates a demarcation of our field of study as restricted to Pentecostal movements alone. In the field of global Pentecostalism, quite some attention has been paid to how the mass mediatisation of Pentecostal and charismatic churches and the circulation of their images across the globe drives the globalisation of a particular 'culture of Pentecostalism'. Indeed, charismatic-Pentecostal performance in Ghana is strongly influenced, through mass media, by the styles of worship, preaching, prayer, dress, body movement, and facial expression exhibited by charismatics and Pentecostals across the world. A focus on the role of media for the global spread of Pentecostal culture alone, however, may overlook how in local religious and media landscapes, such styles move outside of Pentecostalism. Brian Larkin has referred to this process as 'the lability of religious form': 'stylistic elements that emerge within a particular religious tradition but then are loosened from those origins and circulate into other domains' (Larkin 2016, p. 635). Larkin's emphasis on religious *form*, my own attention to religious and media *formats* (De Witte 2003, 2005), and Birgit Meyer's notion of a 'Pentecostlite style' (2004b) are all part of a broader turn in the study of religion towards aesthetics (see also Meyer 2013) that in my view offers a more fruitful angle from which to analyse the dynamics of lived Pentecostalism in broader religious

and non-religious contexts than a preoccupation with doctrines and beliefs does. Other religious groups' appropriations of Pentecostal formats and styles, cut loose from Pentecostal teachings, are a significant part of 'the culture of Pentecostalism' and must be explored if we want to understand the full complexity of how Pentecostalism grows and operates in the world.

### 3. Two Movements in One Setting: The International Central Gospel Church and the Afrikania Mission

The two religious organisations that I studied appear diametrically opposed in many respects. With over 10,000 members, its 4000-seat Christ Temple in Accra, branches all over Ghana and in other parts of Africa as well as in Europe and the United States, a weekly primetime TV programme and daily radio broadcasts, the International Central Gospel Church is one of the largest and most influential charismatic churches in Ghana. Its leader Mensa Otabil is a public personality. His well-established media presence and flamboyant appearance have given him celebrity status. His 'life-transforming teachings' strike chords with a broad audience across Ghana's religious field and he is widely perceived as 'the teacher of the nation.' The Afrikania Mission is dedicated to representing and reviving 'African Traditional Religion' in Ghana's Christian-dominated public sphere and on the international stage of 'world religions.' In contrast to the ICGC's well-oiled and capital-driven media machine, however, the Afrikania Mission lacks resources and struggles to find alternative ways into the media. Intended as a counterweight to the Christian hegemony, it presents a strong voice for the defence of traditional cultural practices, but remains rather marginal. Although the movement seems to attract a growing number of followers in rural areas, the attendance of its worship services in Accra, where the movement originated and is still headquartered, is a far cry from the mass spectacles of charismatic worship. Lastly, the emphasis in traditional religion on secrecy and seclusion makes Afrikania's relationship to the media and the public sphere a lot more problematic than the ICGC's with its explicit strategy of outreach and evangelisation.

But there are also striking parallels between the two groups. Both celebrated their 20th anniversary in the early 2000s in buildings that belied their humble beginnings in the early 1980s. In a period of political turbulence and new cultural awareness, the Afrikania Mission was founded in 1982 by a former Catholic priest, Osofo Komfo Damuah. Two years later, amid a wave of Christian enthusiasm and new spiritual awareness, the International Central Gospel Church was founded in 1984. Early meetings were held in a small classroom, but, to accommodate the rapidly growing membership, a garage, a cinema hall, and a scout hall were rented respectively. In 1996 the church completed its own, huge church hall, the Christ Temple, which it uses for regular services, conferences, concerts and a host of other activities. Meanwhile, the Afrikania Mission moved from renting a drinking spot at the National Cultural Centre for its meetings and worship services to building its three-storey headquarters, used for services, celebrations, education, press conferences, and more.

There is also, surprisingly perhaps, a considerable overlap between the visions of the two movements' leaders. Behind the obvious antagonism of Pentecostal anti-traditionalism and traditionalist anti-Pentecostalism they express, both Mensa Otabil and the subsequent Afrikania leaders propagate an explicit message of Africanist emancipation. Both strive for values of African pride and self-awareness, seek to come to terms with the question of Africanness and modernity, and are well-versed in the Pan-Africanist discourse of 'liberation of mental slavery'. They differ fundamentally, however, in how they flesh out this emancipation. For Afrikania it implies a rejection of Christianity as 'inherently foreign', the religion used to 'dominate and exploit Africans', and a revitalisation of 'traditional religion and culture' as the only source of selfhood for Africans. For Otabil, it implies an Africanist re-reading of the Bible and a very critical approach to 'African culture' (De Witte 2018).

The ICGC and Afrikania also share a complex positioning in Ghana's broader religious field that produces a similar tension between intellectualism and spirit practice in both cases. In the ICGC, Otabil's passion and plea for knowledge, education, and critical thinking stands in tension with the emotional expression and concern with spirits of charismatic-Pentecostal religiosity, also

within his own church. He criticizes and sometimes even ridicules the spiritualist tendencies of many charismatics, and his rationalist message of self-development sets him apart in the field of Ghanaian charismatic Pentecostalism today (see also Gifford 2004; Larbi 2001). But, at the same time, he also depends (for his celebrity status, for his followers, and thus for his income) on the charismatic wave that sweeps the country. His message does not easily fit with charismatic practices like exorcism, divine healing, and reliance on divine intervention, but he has to tolerate them in his church.

The Afrikania Mission aspires to be a 'church' like all other churches, a 'religion' like all other recognised 'world religions.' In this aspiration, as the next section will detail, it takes over many Christian forms. This 'mimetic zeal' (Mary 2002), however, is paired with a 'distinctive zeal', an explicit self-definition as non-Christian, to the extent that it legitimises the movement's existence. It fights for the revival of African Traditional Religion against Christian suppression and claims to represent all traditional religious practitioners and adherents. In practice, however, the specificities of particular cults are hard to fit into the 'common religious form' Afrikania has created and undermine its 'neutrality'. Its concern with 'cleanliness', 'orderliness', and 'beauty', moreover, is hard to match with practices like ecstatic spirit possession and blood sacrifice. For the people Afrikania seeks to attract and represent, such practices are highly meaningful and powerful. Afrikania's intellectualist and modernising approach to traditional religion, then, produces a tension not only with religious practitioners outside Afrikania, but occasionally also with those who have joined the movement.

Finally, the leaders of both the ICGC and Afrikania are media enthusiasts and their movements exist by the very grace of mass media. For both, however, it is complicated to mediate the spiritual power on which their authority and attraction ultimately thrive. It is only at first sight that Afrikania's hampered efforts at media representation stand in stark contrast to the explosion of seemingly unlimited publicity of charismatic-Pentecostal media activity. Both struggle with what I have elsewhere (De Witte 2017) discussed as the problem of spirit presence and media representation. For Otabil, his authority hinges on charisma, on his ability to set in motion what people experience as a flow of Holy Spirit power. This flow risks being broken by the fixity of Otabil's media format. The successful formula of his television broadcast threatens to overrun its own success, and even established pastors like him constantly need to authenticate the implicit message that they are not 'mere' media creations, but embody 'real' and effective anointing from God, that is, divine, not human power. For Afrikania, the perpetual challenge is how to represent in public a religion in which authority is rooted in restricted access to spirit powers, mediated by practices of secrecy and seclusion and threatened by openness. Its media representations are met with caution by shrine priests for whom images may not remain 'mere' representations, but mediate spirit presence into unauthorized spaces. For both the ICGC and the Afrikania Mission, then, entering Ghana's new media sphere implies a constant negotiation of conflicting impulses.

#### 4. Mass Media and the Dialectics of Religious Antagonism and Entanglement

How do charismatic Pentecostalism and African traditional religion relate to each other in Accra's religious landscape, and what does the mass mediation of both religions do to this relationship? By studying the International Central Gospel Church and the Afrikania Mission as part of a single religious field with a shared genealogy and a partly overlapping audience, I discovered that the relationship between charismatic Pentecostalism and African traditional religion in this field is characterised by a paradoxical dialectics of opposition and entanglement. In opposing each other and asserting difference, charismatic Pentecostalism and (neo-)traditional African religion not only influence each other, but are intimately bound up with each other. This dialectic is historically informed by the 'long conversation' between Christianity and indigenous religions, but gets amplified in the present era, in which religious manifestation is increasingly mass mediated. The mass mediation of religion, which boomed with the liberalisation of the Ghanaian media scene in the 1990s, both sharpens



religious antagonism and generates religious aesthetic and discursive forms that are shared across religious boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

Both the charismatic and the traditionalist revival movement have been inherently mass mediated from their very beginnings in the early 1980s. In the 1990s, however, the synergy of democracy, media liberalisation, and neo-liberalism brought about a revolution in the relationships between the Ghanaian state, mass media, religion, and commerce that fundamentally changed both movements' styles and strategies of public presence and representation. From 1992 onwards, Ghana's formerly state-controlled media scene gradually developed into a plural, liberalized, and commercialised field of interaction. Religious groups, and especially charismatic-Pentecostal churches, made use of the new opportunities for media access this offered. This has intensified both religious competition for public presence, expressed in terms of public visibility and audibility, and tensions between born-again Christians and traditionalists in the public sphere. In this field, charismatic Pentecostalism and African traditional religion seem at first sight to be radically opposed in terms of media use and public presence.

The new commercialised media culture of personality creation, spectacle, and dramatisation provides particularly fertile ground for charismatic-Pentecostal media strategies. Charismatic Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on charismatic leaders, massive crowds, and embodiment and dramatic expression of spirit power, flourishes in Ghana's public sphere, where pastors become celebrities and mass-mediated sounds and images facilitate the flow of the Holy Spirit. The success of the televisual culture of charismatic Pentecostalism in Ghana can be traced, I have argued elsewhere (De Witte 2005), to the elective affinities between the formats, styles, and modes of address of commercial broadcast media and those of communicating spirit power in charismatic ritual. African 'Men of God' such as Mensa Otabil tap into the globalised commercial formats of celebrity, spectacle, and branding as a source of power in a local religious context in which religious specialists are perceived to embody divine power. The convergence of these two kinds of power in the figure of the pastor-celebrity enhances his charismatic appeal.

The Afrikania Mission has more difficulty spectacularising traditional religion and bridging the gap between the practices of shrines and the formats of the commercial public sphere. Having lost its earlier state-sponsored radio broadcast to the liberalisation of the broadcast media, Afrikania has adopted new strategies for the public representation of African Traditional Religion (ATR) that make it visually attractive for a broad media audience and seek to counter the demonising representations of traditional religious practices that Pentecostals disseminate. Afrikania's efforts, however, are hampered by lack of resources and dependency on Christian-oriented media houses and professionals. On a deeper level, what complicates Afrikania's media activities is a clash between the requirements of the Christian-dominated televisual public sphere, which presuppose certain formats for what 'religion' is and should look like, and the dominant formats of spiritual mediation in shrines. The latter are not modes of visual attraction, spectacle, and mass address, but rather of seclusion, secrecy, and concealment. In representing ATR in the media, Afrikania thus has to negotiate with traditional priests and priestesses, who are often wary of audiovisual media.

This difference between charismatic Pentecostalism and African traditional religion is reinforced by their antagonistic position towards each other. In forming and authenticating religious identities and subjectivities, both strongly affirm boundaries, stress discontinuity, and present the other as ultimate Other. The charismatic-Pentecostal stance towards traditional religion as the evil Other finds expression in sermons, healing and deliverance rituals, and media representations. Otabil's intellectualist stance towards African traditional religion takes some distance from the sensationalist demonisation of it that inundates the popular media. Nevertheless, his message of radical cultural transformation equally identifies African traditional religion and culture as the root cause of Africa's problems. In a mirroring

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, a comparison with Harri Englund's study of radio broadcasting in Malawi (Englund 2011) suggests parallels between Pentecostalism and human rights as discursive forms that, due to their dominance in particular media, shape wider debates in the public sphere.

move, Afrikania holds Christianity, and charismatic Pentecostalism in particular, responsible for all evil in Ghanaian society. Only a return to traditional religious systems of morality, crime prevention, and social and spiritual control could save the country and the African continent.

Behind the surface of religious differentiation and antagonism, however, interesting continuities and mutual influences emerge. Four shared aspects of charismatic Pentecostalism and African traditional religions are particularly relevant here: first, a religious imaginary that recognises the direct presence and influence of spirit beings in people's daily lifeworld; second, a practical, this-worldly (rather than other-worldly) focus that is directed at spiritual problem-solving and physical, material, and social wellbeing; third, an emphasis on the role and power of divinely elected religious specialists as intermediaries between human beings and spirit powers (despite the ostensible Pentecostal rejection of such mediation) and, by extension, a competition for clients between such religious specialists; and fourth, a bodily regime that values expressive, emotional modes of worship and constitutes the body as the prime medium of interaction with the spirit world. Despite its marked globalism and explicit distancing from African traditional religion, charismatic Pentecostalism thus resonates with much of indigenous religious tradition. This is crucial to understanding its tremendous appeal.

Conversely, the foundation of the Afrikania Mission and its neo-traditionalist revival can be understood only in direct connection with the historical and contemporary presence of Christianity in Ghana. The very notion of African Traditional Religion is a historical product of the close interaction with Christianity. Continuing this interaction, Afrikania has adopted a Christian-derived form and concept of religion for its reformation of traditional religion, despite its fierce opposition to Christianity and its claim to provide an 'authentically African' alternative. This 'christianization' of ATR included the formulation of a systematic doctrine with religious creeds, holy scriptures, and authorised prophets; the possibility of 'conversion' to ATR as a personal choice based on inner conviction; and the practice of Sunday worship service, clearly modelled after Catholic liturgy. Additionally, the terminology Afrikania uses indicates a borrowing from a Christian idea of what religion entails: church, bible, liturgy, preaching, communion. With the rapid rise and public appearance of charismatic-Pentecostal churches there has been a shift in what constitutes the format for religion. Whereas in the past Catholicism provided the format for Afrikania, more recent practices like public conventions, camp meetings, evangelisation, all-night prayers, and a general preoccupation with public audibility and visibility have been taken over from charismatic churches. The same type of Christianity that has pushed Afrikania into a more explicitly anti-Christian attitude, now also provides the dominant format for what religion looks like and drives Afrikania to borrow generously from its repertoire of practices and aesthetic forms through which public presence is established in Accra's urban landscape: a highly visible, huge and brightly colored building with a copious office for the leader; conspicuous signboards, banners and posters along roadsides; the use of a loudspeaker van for public evangelisation; and passionate preaching styles broadcast into the neighbourhood through a public address system at high volume.

Religious groups' increased use of mass media has strengthened tendencies of both mutual opposition and entanglement, thus amplifying the paradoxical dynamics between charismatic Pentecostalism and African traditional religion. On the one hand, with the adoption of mass media, religious groups establish an ever-stronger public presence. They become more assertive and self-conscious while religious differences and antagonisms become ever more marked. Religion increasingly becomes a site of public clash and occasional violence, especially so between Pentecostals and traditionalists. At the same time, the global dissemination of religious messages through television, radio, audio and video tapes and CDs, print media, and Internet sites generates and reproduces similar religious formats not only across spatial boundaries, but also across religious boundaries. However, mass media are more favourable to some religious formats than to others. Through their extensive media activity, charismatic churches have by now become mainstream and have established a strong auditory and visual presence in the public arena, thus providing the format for 'religion' in general and influencing not only other Christian denominations, but also

non-Christian religions seeking publicity. The mass mediatisation of charismatic Pentecostalism thus has a cross-religious impact on media representations and styles of performance, as other religions that do not accept or even radically reject its messages do draw upon its formats of representing religion, albeit with varying success.

In the current religious and media climate, Afrikania employs the media mainly in response to charismatic Pentecostalism's repression of traditional religion and the encroaching 'pentecostalisation' of the nation. In attracting media coverage, however, it draws on dominant styles of representing religion that are heavily influenced by globally circulating images and sounds of charismatic-Pentecostal preaching and worship and that emphasise visual attraction, sonic impression, spectacle, and crowd imagery. These formats of extraversion are at tension with formats of spiritual practice found in traditional shrines. Paradoxically, however, the current Pentecostal hegemony in Ghana's public sphere, at the same time, pushes Afrikania closer to shrine practitioners. Pentecostal churches' emphasis on the reality of African spirits and the ways they offer to deal with them, widely publicised through their media ministries, drives Afrikania to also claim access to spiritual power and allow more room for spiritual practices than in its earlier years. This move also entails an economic aspect of competition in a spiritual market place. Operating in a single arena in which religious specialists of various traditions offer similar spiritual services for similar problems is another important dimension of the close and everyday entanglements of Pentecostalism, African traditional religion, and other religious movements.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article I have examined two religious organisations in Ghana, the charismatic-Pentecostal International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) and the neo-traditionalist Afrikania Mission, as they manifest themselves in the liberalised and commercialised media sphere. This dual focus on two religious groups that seemed at first sight so intrinsically different allowed me to lay bare their complex entanglement. I have argued that, in the Ghanaian religious landscape, charismatic Pentecostalism and African traditional religion are at once strongly opposed to each other and intimately bound up with each other. The ways in which religion gets mass mediated plays an important role in reinforcing both the opposition and the intimacy between them.

On the basis of this conclusion, I wish to offer some reflections on the possibilities and limits of an anthropology of Pentecostalism. The question of course is, how do we frame our field? What would such a label add? When can a framing of our field of study as anthropology of Pentecostalism be productive? I think this framing is most productive at an empirical level, to call attention to an empirical phenomenon: the ubiquitous presence, unprecedented vigour, and extreme diversity of Pentecostalism throughout the world. This has been particularly important against the background of the historical-anthropological suspicion and neglect of Christianity as being 'Western', not 'authentic', or 'foreign' to the cultures under study. The anthropology of Pentecostalism has put Pentecostalism high up on the research agenda, and rightly so. Especially the interest in the global circulation of religious forms and the transnationalisation of religion has produced and will continue to produce fascinating and important ethnographies.

I am more doubtful, however, about the possibilities of an anthropology of Pentecostalism as a theoretical framework. The problem of such a framing is that it tends to reproduce emic notions and categories as analytical notions and categories. To the question of whether scholarly divisions along 'denominational' grounds have much analytical value, I thus tend to respond negatively. What Pentecostals themselves define as the criteria and boundaries of Pentecostalism should be an object of enquiry, and this should not get confused with where we as scholars of Pentecostalism place those boundaries, if we wish to place them at all. Mensa Otabil's ICGC can certainly be analysed as a charismatic-Pentecostal church. However, Otabil also explicitly distances himself from what he considers 'typical' Pentecostalism in present-day Ghana. With his outspokenly anti-spiritualist message, he does not represent a 'typical' Pentecostal church and it may indeed be fruitful to see the

ICGC as something else. The Afrikania Mission is certainly not a Pentecostal church, but it cannot be understood without reference to Pentecostalism. Many of its forms and styles of representation can be recognised as Pentecostal in origin, even if Afrikanians themselves would fiercely deny such an analysis. The point is that any definition of who or what is Pentecostal (or Christian, or traditional) and who or what is not, is always the outcome of historical and political processes of negotiation over such definitions and boundaries. As anthropologists, we should explore these processes rather than reproduce their always temporary and unstable outcome. This same critique can of course be leveled at the anthropology of Christianity, of Islam, of Buddhism and so on, and, in the end, also at the anthropology of 'religion'. The case of the Afrikania Mission makes clear that the struggle for being recognised as 'a religion' is most forcefully fought by those who have historically been denied this label.

In studying Pentecostalism, I suggest, we thus should not limit ourselves to studying Pentecostalism per se. We also have to look at the following: (1) the history and politics of the very category of 'Pentecostal' and its boundaries as it plays out *between* religions in broader religious fields, in local practices of religious identification, and in struggles for public representation and recognition; (2) relationships with other religions, not only from the perspective of Pentecostalism, but also from that of those other religions, recognising that explicit opposition is as much an engagement with Pentecostalism as is subscription; and (3) the spill-over of Pentecostalism into expressions of popular culture and political culture that may not be Pentecostal as such. Limiting the scope of an anthropology of Pentecostalism to Pentecostal churches may not be the most productive way to approach the task. The limits of an anthropology of global Pentecostalism involve the dialogic qualities of debates about public representations of 'religion' that have long arisen in conjunction with new sensational forms in Africa and elsewhere. By keeping the framework of the anthropology of Pentecostalism 'strong at the core and open at the edge', as an interdenominational church in Amsterdam defines its motto, we leave room for the contingencies and surprises that the religious field has to offer and may find significant traces of Pentecostalism in unexpected places.

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