

THE RITUALIZATION OF THE SELF IN GHANAIAN GOSPEL MUSIC

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Introduction

One of the most intriguing trends in current popular culture in Ghana and its diaspora is the blurring of boundaries between the secular and the sacred realms. Fostered by the liberalization of the Ghanaian media sector in 1992 and the appropriation of media technology by the Charismatic churches that started mushrooming in the 1980s, new forms of Christian entertainment emerged that have come to dominate Ghana's public sphere. Among these various media formats, "music is," Rosalind Hackett observed for both Ghana and Nigeria, "one of the most important ways in which the Charismatics construct their own identity and invade space" (1998: 263). It has been noted that the prominence of gospel music is an important factor contributing to the new Charismatic churches' enormous appeal (Gifford 2004: 35). At the same time, Christian popular culture has helped create a wider trans-denominational Charismatic public that is also strongly interlinked transnationally (e.g. Coleman 2000; Marshall-Fratani 1998). While many performers of commercial gospel music are rooted in Charismatic churches, bands, choirs, and congregations, in turn, take up songs, dances, and styles that circulate publicly, re-integrating them into the liturgical context of their worship. In doing so they have thus created a constant feedback between congregational and mass-mediated performance practices, facilitating the emergence of a common religious format and aesthetics (De Witte 2003; Meyer 2008 and 2009).

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Considering the prominence of gospel music in Ghana's public sphere (see also Atiemo 2006; Carl 2012 and 2013; Collins 2004 and 2012), as well as the central place it occupies in Charismatic worship itself, this article explores gospel music performance at the interface of ritual and media.¹ I particularly focus on the interrelationship between the performance practices of congregational worship and the mediated performances that inhabit Ghana's mediascape in various audiovisual formats. Existing studies understand Charismatic expressive culture in Ghana as a "conversion to modernity" (Marshall-Fratani 1998: 286; cf. Dilger 2008; Meyer 1999), as cathartic relief (Collins 2004), or in terms of the indigenization of Christianity (Amanor 2004 and Atiemo 2006). Instead, I argue for approaching this culture as ritual performance, as a form of mimesis that involves embodied patterns of ritualized behavior as well as playful improvisation and that serves, in this way, as a medium of self-creation and self-transformation, what, with reference to anthropologist Thomas Csordas (1990 and 1994), I call the ritualization of the self (see also Butler 2002 and 2008). In doing so, I want to contribute to the understanding of an aspect of Ghanaian popular culture that has so far received relatively little attention. Additionally, I want to add to the more detailed study of Charismatic ritual in general which, as Joel Robbins remarked, "despite its widely acknowledged importance, [...] is notably scarce in the literature" (2004: 126).

Towards this end, I will adopt a double focus on gospel music as media content as well as congregational performance practice.

¹ I use the term 'gospel music' as it is most commonly employed in Ghanaian discourse, to refer to both locally and internationally produced Christian popular music that, in terms of its musical characteristics, may range widely, including styles such as highlife, reggae, R&B, soul, and other African and African American musical types. Though the boundaries are fluid, gospel is principally seen as distinct from other Christian musical practices, particularly those in orthodox mission churches, such as hymn singing. The lineup for gospel music performances is usually a lead singer—who in a congregational context also functions as worship leader—plus a pop band.

Analytically, my argument draws on both the close reading of selected gospel music videos,² as well as ethnographic data that emerged from my ongoing research in Accra and elsewhere in southern Ghana since 2006. My experiences with Charismatic worship have focused particularly on the ministry of a smaller church in the Teshie-Nungua Estates in the southeast of the Accra metropolitan area, Christ Victory Ministries International, which I regularly attended between 2006 and 2009 and since then on a non-regular basis whenever I happen to be in Accra. Over the course of the past seven years I had the chance to participate in and observe church services and other programs at Christ Victory on many occasions, to conduct formal interviews with church officials and musicians, as well as to engage in innumerable informal conversations with congregation members and to form lasting friendships with some of them. In 2011, I additionally embarked on a study of the reception of gospel music videos consisting of a series of focus group discussions with graduate students at the University of Cape Coast.³ On a more personal note and to position myself within this ethnographic setting, I should also add

² The selection of music videos that are included in this article—Christiana Love’s “Moving Forward,” Florence Obinim’s “Yesu beba,” and Isaiah Ampong’s “Bere ben ni”—was guided by popularity, the contrastive nature of their audio-visual content, but also more arbitrary criteria such as availability.

³ Overall, three sessions with six participants each were held on June 16 and 20, 2011, moderated by myself, Eric D. Otchere and, on one occasion, additionally John W. Dankwa. One group was exclusively male, one female, and one mixed. The average age of participants was 27 and all discussions took place in English. The denominational background of participants was mixed with half of the interviewees having an orthodox mission church background and the other half a Charismatic affiliation. 72% of the participants were actively involved in the music-making in their churches as either choristers or members of the praise and worship team and all liked listening to gospel music privately. The sessions lasted between two and two-and-a-half hours and were designed as feedback interviews in which gospel music videos were watched and subsequently discussed. In addition, participants were given a brief questionnaire prior to showing the music videos and they also filled response sheets while watching the clips.

that I am not a Charismatic Christian myself, but that I grew up within the tradition of German Lutheranism. It was when I relocated from Germany to Ghana and particularly through my wife, who happened to be a church member at the time we met, that I became involved in the congregational activities at Christ Victory Ministries (see also Carl 2012).

Conceptually, I draw on ideas from ritual studies as well as the growing interdisciplinary field of performance studies. Ritual performance, and music as ritual performance, I want to suggest, can be understood as an orientational or self-process “in which aspects of the world are thematized, with the result that the self is objectified, most often as a ‘person’ with a cultural identity or set of identities” (Csordas 1994: 5). Simon Frith actually referred to this experience as the “self-in-process” (1996: 109). This perspective resonates with Roland Grimes view, which holds that “in ritualizing human beings discover, then embody and cultivate their worldviews, attitudes, and ethics. Rites are not only about confirming views that people already hold but also about divining new ways to behave in changing circumstances” (2006: 135). Ritual always involves an element of repetition, otherwise it wouldn’t be recognized as ritual, but it also leaves room for variation and playful improvisation. It is particularly here where the creative and transformational potential of ritualized behavior as a self-process lies.

The anthropologist Margaret Drewal, who worked extensively on Yoruba ritual, has described this process as “repetition with critical difference” (1992: 3), linking it with the African American performance practice that Henry Louis Gates Jr. described as signifyin(g) (Gates 1983 and 1988). “To signify,” Drewal paraphrases Gates, “is to revise that which is received, altering the way the past is read, thereby redefining one’s relation to it” (1992: 4). It is this revision, a form of improvisation or rhetorical play, which disrupts the process of signification, making room for

manipulations and opening up new meaning (see also Monson 1996: 98-106). The medium through which these “repetitions with critical difference” function on the performative level and through which the negotiations of identity that are involved are channeled is style. It is, therefore, necessary to consider gospel music in more general stylistic terms, understanding style from a broad and inclusive perspective that encompasses sound structures as well as other features such as body movement, gesture, and fashion, among others. While scholars of Pentecostal popular culture have treated style mainly on the textual level (e.g. Meyer 2008; Rommen 2007), within the framework of a performance-oriented approach it is then necessary to additionally examine how the evocation and embodiment of style occurs as a performative strategy in Charismatic ritual itself.

Music and Worship at Christ Victory Ministries

Christ Victory Ministries International is located in the Teshie-Nungua Estates, a middle-class neighborhood in the southeast of Accra. The church was founded in 1988 by its current head pastor and general overseer Bishop Joseph G. Bart-Plange. Tellingly, the premises where the church is now located were formerly a discotheque, the so-called Stereo Spot, which according to the pastor was a very popular joint in Accra in its days. It was, as Bart-Plange related, a prophetic revelation that in the mid-eighties caused him to turn his night club into a church, after he was delivered and born-again and had moved away from his old sinful ways to devote his life to Christ (interview, 22 September 2013, Accra).

Attendance on an average Sunday at Christ Victory church ranges around hundred to hundred and twenty people and overall the membership of the church is relatively young. The majority of active congregation members are in their twenties and thirties and the church prides itself with a thriving youth ministry. Sunday

services are held in English and they follow the common praise-and-worship format that most Charismatic churches in Ghana adopt. In terms of the music, songs are sung in both English as well as Akan (Twi). As for Charismatic churches more generally, music and dance feature prominently in the worship services at Victory and musical performances often take up more than half of the time of the three to four hour services. Currently, the church runs one choir, the Christ Encounters, and a popular band consisting of drum set, electric bass, and two keyboards. One of the challenges in running the music groups is consistency, since fluctuations in membership occur frequently. Experienced female choristers frequently leave the church after they get married to join the churches of their husbands while other musicians trained at Victory have sometimes been enticed away by other churches (interview Bart-Plange, 22 September 2013, Accra).

The worship at Victory church is lively and energetic, with an extended praise-and-worship section at the beginning of Sunday services that lasts at least an hour, sometimes taking up to one and a half hours. This is followed by song ministration, which may last for another fifteen to twenty minutes, in which singers from the choir are featured as soloists, presenting songs to the congregation that they have prepared with the band during the week. While praises and worship are highly participatory musical performances involving the whole congregation, song ministration features more presentational performances where audience members show appreciation with affirmative interjections, modest dancing and the 'dashing' of money to the soloist, either by dropping it in a box put up in front or, to express a particularly high degree of admiration for a specific performance, by sticking banknotes to the singer's forehead.

The mood of praises is spirited and joyful and their musical form is most commonly highlife, i.e. in 4/4 time stressing the "off-beats" after two, three, and four: one-two-AND-three-AND-four-

AND (for more detailed transcriptions see, e.g., Collins 2006). The tempo of the praise section, which constitutes a seamless performance in which one chorus follows the other, usually starts at around one hundred and twenty to thirty beats per minute and then speeds up to sometimes one hundred and eighty beats per minute as people get excited and the dancing and singing becomes more and more intense. The pieces of the praise section, which are initiated by the worship leader spontaneously as the performance unfolds, are popular choruses of both local and international gospel songs that circulate widely in Ghana's mediascape, sung in Akan as well as English. As choruses are continuously repeated over a span of time and usually just consist of two or three lines, even new songs that are introduced are quickly picked up by the congregation.

In stark contrast to the praise section, the music during worship, which immediately follows praises, is slow, sometimes unmetered, at other times in very slow triple or duple meter, and sometimes a cappella. Rather than dancing, people sway their bodies with their hands directed upwards, praying, some kneeling or lying with their face turned down, speaking in tongues, some breaking out into tears. The most important difference between praises and worship, as congregation members and pastors stressed, is, however, not so much the tempo of the music but generally the mindset of worshippers. As one of the junior pastors in the church, Apostle Joseph Kwei, explained: "Praises is more committed to thanksgiving [...], unlike worship. In worship there is communication. [...] The consciousness of God is more in worship than in praises" (interview, 21 September 2013, Accra).

Songs in both the praise and worship section are not rehearsed by the band and choir; rehearsals rather focus on those songs that feature during song ministration. As one of the worship leaders at Victory, a woman in her early thirties, explained: "Most of the songs that we sing are songs that people have done and they play

on the radio. [...] So, no matter what happens, people will have a clue as they have heard the songs somewhere” (interview, 30 August 2013, Accra). A typical example for a praise song is “Ayeyi wura” (Lord of Praises), which was originally released by the group Soul Winners in 2008 (YouTube 2008b). The chorus is short and easy to memorize:

<i>Ayeyi wura ee</i> (repeated)	Lord of Praises
<i>Yeyi w'aye</i>	We praise you
<i>Na ye ma wo so</i>	And exalt you

There are a host of common worship songs that are sung at Christ Victory church including popular North American pieces like “Here I am to Worship” or “You Raise Me Up” (YouTube.com 2006 and 2007). Recent Ghanaian productions that found their way into the service include No Tribe’s “Ohene ye hyira wo” (King, we bless you) and Sonnie Bado’s “Let it Rain” (YouTube 2010c and 2012e). There are some songs that can be used for both praises and worship with the most marked difference being the meter or tempo and generally the mood in which the song is rendered. An example for this is Lenny Akpalie’s “Most High God,” which most interviewees classified as a worship song, though it is often performed during praises, and which has become something like an evergreen in Ghanaian churches since its release a few years back (YouTube.com 2010b). In fact, quite a number of gospel artists in Ghana nowadays publish songs in two different versions, one upbeat and danceable praise version, and one slow solemn worship version, thus adjusting recording formats to Charismatic worship practices.

The Style and Imagery of Gospel Music in Ghana

To give an idea of the stylistic diversity as well as the imagery that characterizes commercial gospel music in Ghana, I will present a close reading of three selected gospel videos, Christiana

Love's "Moving Forward," Florence Obinim's "Yesu beba," and Isaiah Ampong's song "Berɛ ben ni." Generally speaking, music videos have become one of the most common formats in the dissemination of music in Ghana, filling the airtime of many of the growing number of television stations that are consumed both in private homes and public places. Music videos are also an important format in which people share their favorite music on social media like facebook.com and WhatsApp, and they inspire, in turn, congregational performance practices. One of characteristics that make gospel music so successful, I would argue, is particularly its inclusiveness and ability to absorb virtually any stylistic element. Far from being one homogeneous style, the imagery of gospel music draws, as we will see, on diverse stylistic elements from a multitude of sources, a circumstance that should make us skeptical about interpretations that consider Charismatic expressive culture as a coherent whole.

Christiana Love: "Moving Forward"

The song "Moving Forward" by Christiana Love was the title track of her 2008 album; the publication of the video followed the same year (YouTube.com 2008a). Having been one of the most popular gospel songs in Ghana in 2008 and 2009, many church bands subsequently took it up and integrated it into their repertoire. 2008 was an election year in Ghana and the song was, among others, co-opted by the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in its presidential campaign for their candidate Nana Akufo-Addo, where the phrase "moving forward" became a metaphor for national development. While the politicization of the song took place with the consent of the artist—Christiana Love also performed at NPP rallies herself—it prompted some churches to ban it from their services in order to avoid association with any specific political party. The co-optation of popular expressive culture has become quite common in Ghana "to incorporate public

sentiment into representations of politics and tune in to the links between the political body and market tastes” (Shipley 2013a: 161). Also, the spiritualization of politics has a long history going back to at least independence and Christian metaphors abound in Ghanaian political discourse (Gifford 2004: 161-190).

Harmonically based on a simple I-IV-V-I progression, the lyrics of the song, which are in English and Pidgin, are short and easy to grasp. The song sets out with the chorus, starting with a descending melodic line played by a synthesizer which is subsequently taken up by Christiana Love, singing to it the words, “through Jesus Christ.” This call is answered by the backing vocalists, who sing the phrase, “I am moving forward, I am going forward.”

*Through Jesus Christ
I am moving forward
Through Jesus Christ
I am going forward*

*Jesus died for me o, abi?
He died for all my problems o
Resurrection power dey for my side o
Liberty dey for me o*

Meanwhile, on the visual level, we see the singer-protagonist getting into a bright yellow Mercedes Benz convertible. Scenes of Christiana Love driving around town in this—obviously expensive—car are then alternated with a group of male dancers, all dressed in black, and herself, singing and dancing in the interior of what seems to be a big, luxurious mansion. While in the scenes where she drives the sports car, the singer is dressed in Western fashion, in the scenes shot inside the house she is wearing a modern African garment which is clearly inspired by Nigerian fashion, particularly the headgear. The group of male dancers quite obviously also adopted a Nigerian style of dancing.

There are other stylistic elements that are added as the video proceeds. In terms of musical style the song prominently features an hour-glass drum (*dondo*) as well as an electric guitar as solo instruments, linking it with other popular West African musical types such as *jùjú* and highlife. At the same time, the 12/8 meter of the song makes reference to local dance-drumming types, particularly *adowa* and *agbadza*, the former being originally an Akan dance and the latter being mostly performed within Anlo-Ewe-speaking communities in southern Ghana.⁴ In highlife this rhythmic style is known by different local names, sometimes referred to as ‘odonson,’ ‘atini’ or ‘blues’ (Collins 2006: 182-3). Both *adowa* and *agbadza* are also subtly implied in the movements of two young female dancers who wear traditional cloth and beads and who appear towards the middle of the video clip.

Other visual elements we can discern are, for instance, a blond, long-haired, white Jesus ascending to heaven, an image that circulates widely throughout Ghana in the form of posters and bumper stickers. When Christiana Love sings the line, “Jesus died for me, he died for all my problems,” more realistic, Hollywood-mediated images of Jesus on the cross and covered in blood (as they featured prominently in Mel Gibson’s “Passion of Christ”) appear.

Finally, we also find elements of Nollywood, that is, Nigerian video film productions which are very popular in Ghana. The very setting of the video, the luxurious mansion and the expensive car, seems to highlight an aesthetics of conspicuous consumption that features prominently in Nigerian and local, Nigerian-inspired, movie productions. This imagery is in line, at the same time, with the materialistic theology or ‘gospel of prosperity’ adopted by many Charismatic churches (Coleman 2000; Gifford 2004), where prosperity and success are understood as manifestations of God’s blessing and divine grace (*Onyame adom*). In sequences where the

⁴ Some authors might alternatively interpret the meter as 6/8 (cf. Anku 1997).

singer-protagonist passes by people in the street in her car, the editors of the video added a computer-generated visual effect, as if sparks would emanate from Christiana Love's hand, jumping over to passersby and, thus, implying that her blessings are further passed on. Such visual effects are commonly employed in local movie productions to depict the working of spiritual powers that are otherwise beyond the visible realm.

Florence Obinim: "Yesu beba"

In contrast to "Moving Forward," the song and video "Yesu beba" (Jesus will come) by Florence Obinim is quite different in mood (YouTube.com 2010a). Generally, the song is millenarian in character. It asks people to prepare for Jesus' imminent coming as a judge of mankind, as an excerpt of the first verse and the chorus illustrates:

<i>Emmere yi ena metease</i>	It is in these times that I live
<i>Okyena dee</i>	As for tomorrow
<i>Emmere nni ho ma me</i>	There is no time for me
<i>Mefiri ha yi ara,</i>	I start from right here
<i>siesie me ho</i>	to prepare myself
<i>Ako hyia Yesu</i>	To meet Jesus
<i>Orebefa ne mma</i>	Who is about to take his children
<i>Mehwe mafa wiase</i>	I see that I have taken the world
<i>(Nneema nyinaa)</i>	(All the things)
<i>Mafa abo me bo</i>	I have taken it as my own
<i>(Oh, Yesu reba)</i>	(Oh, Jesus is coming)
<i>Otemmuafu</i>	The judge
<i>Yesu Kristo reba</i>	Jesus Christ is coming
<i>Orebefa ne mma</i>	He is about to take his children

The melodic and harmonic structure of the song are based on the tune "Calvary" from the Methodist hymn book (MHB 351), but the way in which Obinim performs it and the video itself are both strongly reminiscent of the South African gospel singer Rebecca

Malope, whose productions and style Obinim has been adapting. Generally, the video clip shows striking similarities to Malope's work, particularly as far as the dressing and gestures of the singer as well as the overall color management are concerned. Compared to Christiana Love's "Moving Forward" we can discern both similarities and differences. Thus, the setting chosen for some of the video's scenes also features a big, luxurious house, furnished in a modern style—clearly status symbols of Ghana's aspiring upper middle class. Here, however, the images are distorted by the surreal, under-saturated colors in which the whole video was shot and which seem to particularly highlight the singer's bright red dress—again, a stylistic device borrowed from Malope.

We also re-encounter the image of the white, blonde Jesus, though this time he rather seems to be descending as a judge. The depiction of Judgment Day itself, with computerized flashlights and thunder while the singer-protagonist wanders around in a cemetery, and finally the ascension to heaven of those chosen by Jesus, are again reminiscent of the aesthetics of Nollywood movies and their Ghanaian counterparts. The negative aspects of modern living are portrayed in this video by a young man who drinks alcohol—tellingly Bailey's Irish Cream, a drink that is also associated with upper class life—and refuses to listen to the word of God. Beyond this, however, the song and the images remain unspecific as to how exactly Christians should prepare themselves for the Second Coming of Jesus and the listener/viewer is left with the general impression of the song's mellifluous and melancholic mood.

Isaiah Ampong: "Berε ben ni"

More explicit and much more critical in this regard is the song "Berε ben ni" (What time is this?) by Isaiah Ampong (YouTube.com 2011). While sharing with Obinim's piece an

overall millenarian vision of the world and urging people to prepare for Judgment Day, in contrast to the other two videos discussed, Ampong fashions his own image much more like a preacher himself. He thus asks:

<i>Eberɛ a yɛde pɛ sika ni?</i>	Is this the time to search for money?
<i>Eberɛ a yɛde pɛrɛ ahonyadɛɛ ni?</i>	Is this the time to struggle for properties?
<i>Eberɛ a yɛde di nkɔnkɔnsa nɛ atorɔ ni anaa?</i>	Is this the time for gossip and lies?
<i>Sɔrɛ bɔ nkɔnkɔnsa e, Yesu reba o</i>	So you continue gossiping, Jesus is coming
<i>Sɔrɛ, sɔrɛ ka nɛmpa Na woada akyɛ o, mɛ nua</i>	Get up and preach the good news You have slept for too long, my sibling

Quite atypically for gospel music in Ghana, Ampong explicitly talks against the quest for money and prosperity and he even criticizes the tendency of Ghanaian Christianity to become more and more money-conscious and business-like itself, as in these lines of the song:

<i>Wosɛ aduane ntena Awurade fie</i>	You say there should be food in the house of the Lord
<i>Nti asafo mma abɔ afɔrɛɛ ama wo</i>	So church members have been giving you offerings
<i>Woapagya sika yi de akɔ tɔ kaa</i>	You've used this money to buy a car
<i>Wo kaa mu aircon sene Russia awɔ</i>	The AC in your car is colder than in Russia
<i>Onipa ba no ba a ɔbɛhunu</i>	When the Son of Man comes he will see
<i>Agyedifoɔ wɔ asaase yi so Eberɛ bɛn mu na woada yi?</i>	The faithful in this land How can you be asleep at this time?

Unusual as the critical stance of Ampong's lyrics is, we should add that his criticism does not result in an appeal to resistance or

active social change, but merely in the promise of a better life in the 'next world.' Shot in a rural setting, which is certainly closer to the lived-world of most Ghanaians than the luxurious mansions we have been seeing so far, the imagery of the song's video also employs satirical elements which are rarely found in the context of gospel music. The corrupt pastor, for instance, who comes to deceive the villagers to get presents and a big car, walks around with a ridiculously oversized bible, wearing a wig and dancing funnily. The representation of the other characters in the video, such as a group of gossiping market women, likewise employs exaggeration as stylistic device as it is well known from slapstick comedies and which seems in stark contrast to the seriousness of the message.

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In discussions of the imagery of Charismatic expressive culture scholars have argued that "Pentecostalism provides an imaginary space in which people may address their longing for a modern, individual and prosperous way of life" (Meyer 1999: 163), or, in the same vein, that Charismatic yields forms of popular culture that are "safe for consumption by 'born-again' Christians" (Hackett 1998: 258). Considering the way people watch and discuss gospel videos, the interpretation of Christian expressive culture as a "conversion to modernity," involving a "process of breaking with individual and collective pasts [that] enables converts to become 'autonomous selves,' free individuals in possession of their subjectivity" (Marshall-Fratani 1998: 286), seems, however, not very convincing. Besides the crude dichotomy between a supposedly communal past as against the modern subjectivity of individualism underlying such arguments, we should first of all note that people do not consume gospel music—or other forms of Christian expressive culture, for that matter—exclusively, but aside other genres, types, and formats. These are

therefore not measured in absolute terms, but rather in relation to each other.

In the context of everyday life, musical preferences are strategic choices that are made purposively to either sustain or evoke particular moods, sensibilities, and memories (Crafts, Cavicchi, and Keil 1993). With gospel music this becomes particularly obvious in the way people listen to solemn worship songs such as Obinim's "Yesu beba." In group interviews conducted in Cape Coast, participants mentioned particular hours of the day when they prefer to listen to worship music of this kind, often especially in the morning to set the mood for the day (group interview [session 2], 16 June 2011, Cape Coast). Similarly, members at Christ Victory church related that they practiced worship sessions to recorded music by themselves, in the more intimate spaces of their private homes. As this church member told me:

I just love music. Anytime I'm not happy, when I'm in my room, I'll just sing—and after the singing I realize that I have become okay. I even do worship alone and by the time I realize, I'm okay. I love music. (Interview, 30 August 2013, Accra)

Another woman related that she even preferred the worship alone, since external restraints in the church sometimes disrupt her spiritual experience:

A: Sometimes I sing, when I'm exhausted, when I'm alone, or things are bothering me. I encourage myself with music—worship songs. Sometimes, I'll be singing alone and I end up crying, just here by myself.

F: But, does it feel the same as in church?

A: Oh, yes, yes. Even sometimes in church, you'll be distracted. Sometimes, you are here, and you are in tune. It's like you're focusing on God, standing, and then somebody wants to pass in front of you, distracting you. Or somebody is falling, and then they distract you. (Interview, 24 August 2013, Accra)

Another point to stress is that people interpret songs as well as the public personae of artists in genre-specific terms. The expectations towards gospel songs and artists are therefore different from songs and performers of other genres. In this regard, Christiana Love's video clip, while being among the most popular ones, also fostered some of the most controversial debates, both with regard to its message as well as the figure of the artist herself.

Concerning the message of personal success the song "Moving Forward" is celebrating, one discussant was of the view that Christiana Love "was showing off [...]. She has moved forward in, like, being rich—that is what she is trying to portray. [But] the way she goes about it [...] makes it offensive." Somebody else added that "in her case it's just thanking God for riches" (group interview [session 1], 16 June 2011, Cape Coast). Particularly when comparing Love's "Moving Forward" with Among's overall more critical message in "Berε ben ni," most people argued that, while becoming prosperous is principally a positive thing, Christians would still need to exercise some form of moderation. "If there is too much of it, that's what makes it vanity. We have to dress and we have to eat by all means, but if you have an obsession for it, that is when it becomes vanity" (group interview [session 1], 16 June 2011, Cape Coast). On the other hand, some raised concerns that the satirical images used in Among's clip were inappropriate in the context of gospel music.

Another issue that arose in discussions about gospel music was the dressing and body language of particularly female artists. Again, Christiana Love's clip "Moving Forward" fostered the most heated debates in this regard, where participants felt her style to be "too extravagant" and particularly her dressing inappropriate for a gospel artist. "As a Christian or gospel musician, if you really want to portray being Christ-like [then] that dressing is out," a female participant for instance held. Others, too, found Christiana Love "showing too much skin" or being "too romantic" (group interview

[session 1], 16 June 2011, Cape Coast). On the other hand, there was also a sense of admiration from both female and male participants in group interviews about Love's personal achievements and her unwavering attitude in developing her own, distinctive style. This perception coincides with a discussion about Christiana Love's development as an artist I had with friends from Victory church, which took place while we were watching a compilation of her video clips from various stages in her career. While some of the older clips provoked amusement about her overall "local," inexperienced look and demeanor, the general consensus was that she had indeed "moved forward" not only in purely materialistic terms, but more importantly in developing her full potential as an artist as well as a woman.

Gospel Music and the Ethics of Ritual Performance

Every improvisation in a ritual context, Drewal reminds us, "risk[s] transgressing the boundaries of appropriateness. These boundaries are not hard and fixed, however, so that negotiating appropriateness is itself another dimension of improvisation" (1992: 7). Issues of the appropriateness of specific styles, be it musical types or fashion styles, have given rise to countless debates among Christians in Ghana. The ethical dimension of musical style has also been highlighted in a study of the music of the Full Gospel community in Trinidad by Timothy Rommen, who refers to the "ethics of style" (Rommen 2007). While Rommen discusses the ethics of style primarily on the discursive level and with regard to subgenres within Trinidadian gospel music, in the following I want to consider the ethical dimension of style as an embodied aspect of congregational performance.

In the Charismatic context in Ghana, questions of appropriate dressing feature, as we have already seen, prominent and it is particularly the female body that often serves as a yardstick for the moral condition of the congregation, or, even society, at large.

While the question of how particular female gospel artists dress and make themselves up remains an issue of debate among born-again Christians, female singers like Christiana Love, Philipa Baafi, or Florence Obinim, with their sometimes extravagant styles have, at the same time, broadened the scope of what is appropriate for Christian women and what is not. Thus, while in some conservative churches in Ghana even the wearing of trousers is still considered taboo for women, at Victory, with its more youthful style, the dress code is also more liberal. Nonetheless, dressing remains an issue and particularly female members are monitored and, if church authorities feel the need to do so, corrected. A female chorister related to me an account concerning the wearing of an ankle bracelet made of local beads. While she insisted that the bracelet was a harmless fashion statement, the choir master considered it “inappropriate” for a woman and, when she refused to remove the ankle bracelet, excluded her from the rehearsal and the performance in church on the following Sunday.

Another aspect of Charismatic ritual where the ethical dimension of performance comes to the fore is in connection with dancing styles. Dancing, which in services features most prominently during praises, offers participants a host of opportunities to engage in stylistic experiments and playful improvisation, though here, too, there is a general sense among congregation members that as Christians they should exercise some restraint. As one member expressed it: “Fine, David removed his shoes and then he danced... but a decent dance!” (interview, 24 August 2013, Accra). Nonetheless, one can observe that particular individuals develop highly idiosyncratic dancing styles, expressing in this way their individuality as well as their distinct relationship to the divine. Something I often observed at Christ Victory church and that, as discussed above, also features in some gospel music videos is the emulation of ethnic dance styles such as agbadza. While this might be read, at first sight, as an evocation of ethnicity,

dance-drumming styles like agbadza or adowa are actually evoked by people much more playfully, often in a competitive manner where dancers challenge and imitate each other, maintaining thereby what Drewal has called “competitive interrelatedness” (1992:7). Generally, these dancing styles were seen as unproblematic in the church context by people I spoke to, as they were thought of as merely “fun.”

Another dance fashion that was introduced in the church more recently, and that fostered more debate in terms of its appropriateness, is azonto (see Shipley 2013b) or, as people have started calling it in the Christian context, Christozonto, or, gospel azonto. Though originally a “worldly” style, congregations across Ghana and its diaspora have enthusiastically taken up the azonto dance to include it in their worship, as numerous uploads on portals like YouTube also bear witness (YouTube.com 2012a, 2012b and 2012c). In 2012, for instance, the gospel singer Herty Borngreat released a song labeled “Christo Azonto” which is rhythmically based on a highlife pattern but which features some of the original movements of azonto and in which the dance was redefined in Christian terms as a “praise dance” (*ayeyi asa*) (YouTube.com 2012d). Her production was clearly inspired by the great popularity azonto already enjoyed among Ghanaian Christians, emulating congregational performance practices with the prospect of commercial success.

The debates that surround azonto’s inclusion in worship clearly show the ethical concerns that ritual improvisation brings about. And quite a number of congregation members at Christ Victory still feel ambivalent about the dance. As one female congregation member in her early thirties explained:

When songs and dances come like this, you know, it’s like they are spirits. So, immediately you hear a certain beat, it makes you think, ‘Ey, maybe I should do it.’ Then, by the time you realize, you are doing it. But I think you should control

yourself when you go to church. Church is church. That is not where you are going to dance your azonto. (Interview, 30 August 2013, Accra)

And another woman in her mid-thirties expressed quite similar concerns:

A: From my perception of azonto, I think there is a spirit backing it. Because you'll see somebody who doesn't know how to dance azonto and anytime they hear the music, even when they're walking on the street, they start dancing... even babies.

Q: So you think it's a spiritual thing?

A: Exactly, I think it's a spiritual thing, because—a whole lot of dances have come and gone and you don't see anybody walking on the street, dancing those dances. You don't see them. But the moment this azonto thing came in... and the azonto thing has been in the system for like three to four years. It's a worldly thing and it's not pleasing in the eyes of God. (Interview, 24 August 2013, Accra)

On the other hand, the dance remains extremely popular, particularly with young men in the church, even though pastor Bart-Plange initially tried to stop them from performing it. "Sometimes the dances they dance are not good," he explained,

but, at the same time, you see that God didn't stop David from dancing. [...] But some of them are beyond the line. Sometimes you see people shouting and jumping, that's all praises. But you can't come and shake your waist [i.e. make suggestive movements] and say you are praising God. (Interview, 22 September 2013, Accra)

The pastor explained that he wouldn't stop people dancing during the service, since he doesn't want to spoil anybody's mood. He would, however, mention the things he does not find right in his sermon and talk to the individuals concerned afterwards, so that

they stop performing specific movements. One of the junior pastors, Apostle Kwei, had a more democratic stance towards the dancing of different styles, including azonto:

Sometimes the attitude, the motive with which one does it, also counts. Sometimes, you see somebody doing it, and although it's the same as azonto, the kind of emotions attached to it make you see, it's a little different. The main thing is the motive behind it. [...] It's a surprise you throw at the church. So, when you see that you are not getting the response you wanted, next time you will follow what everybody else is doing. (Interview, 21 September 2013, Accra)

Those young people who actually enjoy importing different dance fashions into the praises on Sundays also stressed the communal, shared aspect of it. Asked about azonto one young man told me: "It's a normal dance... From our perspective, from our point of view, it is a whole dance altogether. The way you move your body, to glorify the Lord, that's what it is." And another dance enthusiast came into the conversation, adding: "You can even put your head on the ground and raise your legs to worship God." The first continued to explain:

I know how to dance and that's what I do to glorify God. What somebody knows is what he or she brings on board, okay? So, we all make it as a group thing. We all bring what we have on board. Like, this guy has his dance, this guy has his dance, we all bring it in like this. Other people might not like it. But that is what we are, that is what we can offer. (Interview, 22 September 2013, Accra).

After all, the fact that azonto is now virtually everywhere, even in some of the orthodox mission churches, attests to the creative power of congregations that often exceeds the more narrow constraints of religious doctrine and which sometimes also challenges power hierarchies within congregations. Particularly for

younger congregation members at Christ Victory church, ritual improvisation is an important way to express themselves, to show everybody, as the young man above put it, what they are.

Conclusion

In the foregoing, I have been arguing for a performance-oriented approach that emphasizes the agency and reflexivity of performers to develop a better understanding of popular Christianity and gospel music in Ghana. In actively engaging with Christian popular culture in performance, people enter into a creative dialogue with available forms, ideas, and behavior, rather than simply adopting them. Gospel music is characterized by a constant process of appropriation and re-appropriation oscillating between congregational and mass mediated performance practices. The negotiation of appropriateness is, as we have seen, an integral part of this creative process of meaning-making, and its major medium is style. Part of the success of Charismatism in Ghana, I would argue, is exactly this stylistic inclusiveness and its ability to absorb and reinterpret popular cultural forms of all sorts in religious terms.

Much of the literature on Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity has stressed that the ritualization of rupture and discontinuity is one of its central concerns and that, in spiritual terms, local cultural elements often get reintegrated into the expressive realm of Pentecostalism in the negative and destructive form of the satanic (see Robbins 2004: 127-130). As far as musical performance is concerned, however, I would rather stress continuity as one of the major aspects of Charismatic ritual in Ghana. In the experience of worshippers, music occupies a special place as it integrates different experiential spaces. Not only does gospel music span across the secular and the sacred realm, providing forms of popular culture that integrate religious and everyday experience, but it also bridges public and intimate sociabilities, constituting what Byron

Dueck has described in a different context as the “public performance of intimacy” (2007: 51).

Whatever other motives people have to go to church, the musical experience of Charismatic worship is, for many, an important aspect of their spirituality. As one female congregation member at Christ Victory Ministries told me: “When I go to church and I miss praise and worship, I feel like I have not been to church. ‘Cause it gingers my spirit, it excites me, so it’s like my heart is already open for the message” (interview, 24 August 2013, Accra). Charismatic doctrine generally stresses the personal relationship between the individual and God, and music is a crucial means to “enter into the spirit” (Twi, *wura honom mu*). Much like musical experience among the Friday Masowe apostolics of Zimbabwe described by Matthew Engelke (2007), the semiotic ideology of musical sound among Charismatic Christians in Ghana is “live and direct,” not primarily mediated by textual meaning. “For apostolics, there is something about the human voice in song to God that serves as a vehicle for God’s presence—that indeed *is* God’s presence. Singing, as a certain kind of sound, conveys that presence in itself” (Engelke 2007: 207; emphasis in the original). Among Charismatic Christians in Ghana, too, when people speak about their musical experience they do not stress so much what music *means* but rather what it *does* to them—it excites, opens the heart, engenders happiness, conveys one’s inner self, and creates a space where the presence of God can be felt.

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