

## SACRALISING NATURAL SPACES: COMPETITIVE PERFORMANCES IN CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN RELIGIOSITY

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**Abstract:** *This paper investigates the proliferation of sacred spaces in contemporary Ghanaian religiosity. It examines three renowned sacred spaces of nationwide patronage -Moment of Glory Prayer Army (MOGPA), Atwea Mountains and Achimota Forest, and raises three pivotal themes that build on three related arguments. First, it contends that through sacralization, religion domesticates natural spaces and expands urban landscapes. Secondly, the development demonstrates the enduring influence of indigenous religious understandings in shaping the ongoing modernity project of Ghana's Pentecostals, and finally, while such sacred places have become or are believed to be charged with spiritual abilities to solve an adherent's problems, the actions of the founders are deeply rooted in economic motivations, often inciting competition on the religious market of Ghana. The ethnographic research method was used in data gathering and the data was interpreted using the metaphor of the religious market place. The findings indicate that the domesticated spaces allow cross-faith access, which confirms an indigenous religious attribute, whereby devotees seek solutions anywhere they can find one. Also, urban spaces are domesticated for the sake of cost and convenience and finally, religious leaders of those spaces to offer solutions to clients, sell religious products to obtain both economic as well as social capital.*

**Key Words:** Economics; Indigenous religions; Pentecostalism; Performance; Religious market; Sacred space.

### **Introduction**

The many religious agents and institutions operating in its religious market has made Ghana something of a zoo for the academic study of religious diversity and plurality. “Zoo, as used in this context is a metaphor that explains the multiplicity or collection of diverse religious traditions on Ghana’s religious landscape.”<sup>1</sup> One intriguing feature of

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<sup>1</sup> Genevieve Nrenzah, “Modernizing Indigenous Priesthood and Revitalizing Old Shrines: Current Developments on Ghana’s Religious Landscape” (PhD diss., University of Bayreuth, 2015), 73.

this market is the creative ingenuity religious agents display through the strategies they deploy in recruiting members, in order to remain on top in the competition for religious capital. The growing practice of sacralising uninhabited or natural environments and using these spaces to demonstrate magico religious power is one of such strategy's agents are using to bait members in Ghana nowadays.

Spaces such as forests, rivers, and mountains or what Der Van calls "artificial sanctuaries," which used to be sites of indigenous religious spirituality, are now being used by Christians or shared by Christian and non-Christian groups alike, alongside designated prayer camps, churches, and mosques.<sup>2</sup> These supposedly spiritually fortified sites are revered or marked as sacred based on what the founder or believers perceived happened or what can happen in that place.<sup>3</sup> The general context of the rise in the sacralization of space in Ghana is as a result of the desperate need for magico-spiritual power to forge ahead in secular and spiritual endeavours; in a modern Ghana where the benefits of economic progress are not manifesting in the lives of the majority. This has engendered a new wave of individual tendencies of having a spiritual guard or 'spiritual father' to direct one's paths in a physical world.

Miracles and ability to demonstratively 'perform' has become the yardstick for clients or believers to pick and choose the type of spiritual father they so desire and consult such religious leaders in their advertised sacred sites.<sup>4</sup> Religious leaders' showmanship of the possession of potent spiritual powers in these sacred spaces is designed to entice new believers to expand their clientele base.

I offer three related arguments that, through sacralization, religion domesticates natural spaces and expands urban landscapes. This development demonstrates the enduring influence of deep-rooted

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<sup>2</sup> Dionigi Albera, "Ritual Mixing and Interrituality at Marian Shrines," in *Interreligious Relations and the Negotiation of Ritual Boundaries: Explorations in Interrituality*, ed. Marianne Moyaert (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 137-138; <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05701-5>; Jackie Feldman Christian, "Holy Land Pilgrimage as an Interreligious Encounter," in *Interreligious Relations and the Negotiation of Ritual Boundaries: Explorations in Interrituality* ed. Marianne Moyaert (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 111-131; <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05701-5> .

<sup>3</sup> Ron E. Hassner, "To Have and to Hold: Conflicts Over Sacred and the Problem of Indivisibility," *Security Studies* 12, no.4 (2003): 6.

<sup>4</sup> Sacred space and sacred sites are used interchangeably throughout the work.

indigenous religious understandings in shaping the ongoing Christian modernity project of Ghana's Pentecostals. Finally, I argue that while such places have become or are believed to be charged with spiritual abilities to solve an adherent's problem, the actions of the founders are deeply informed by economic motivations. These sites are midpoints for economic jamborees. I build on the data gathered through ethnographic research of three religious' sites located in Ghana — The Atwea mountains in Mampong, Ashanti region, Achimota forest in Accra and the Moment of Glory Prayer Army (MOGPA) in Abrankese off Lake Bosomtwe. I draw on examples from three sacred sites to demonstrate my arguments. In the next part I will briefly discuss sacred spaces in Ghana and give a description of the three selected religious sacred sites.

### **Sacred Space in Ghana**

Designating spaces as sacred has become one of the tacit requirements of Ghana's contemporary Christianity. I indicate so because it will seem that the Pentecostals aside, other religious groups are involved in this process. We cannot claim that the processes described in this paper are representative of happenings in all the sacred sites in Ghana's religious field. However, they furnish us with the general context on an emerging development on Ghana's religious market. We can recognize these sacred spaces by the names assigned to them or the name of the ritual specialist who founded them.

The leaders are a both males and females and are locally, nationally, or internationally renowned. Some of the leaders of the several sacred sites are Rev Isaac Osei Bonsu of Moment of Glory Prayer Army (MOGPA), Edumfa Heavenly Ministry owned by Mrs. Grace Mensah, Mount Horeb by Rev. Paul Nii Okine, Hebron prayer camp by elder Donkor, Abasua Prayer Camp, also known as the mountain of God was established by the Abasua local Methodist church when pastor Abraham Osei-Asibey went up the mountain to pray, Vida Bethel Prayer Camp located at Aprade Parkoso off Ejisu road, Kumasi and owned by Mama Vida, Rev Obofour of APC Kumasi, Bishop Obininim of International Gods Way Church, Opambour krom owned by Prophet Ebenezer Opambor Yiadom Adarkwa of Ebenezer Miracle and Worship Centre fame.

The spaces are either individually acquired properties or public/natural spaces, which several groups often share. Some of the shared spaces could be referred to as ‘no man’s lands’ as no specific individual or group can claim exclusive ownership of them. Examples include the Atwea Mountains, and Achimota forest. Three of these spaces will be the foci of our discussion in the sections that follow.

### **Moment of Glory Prayer Army (MOGPA)**

The Moment of Glory Prayer Army popularly called MOGPA is led by Rev Isaac Osei Bonsu (Rev O.B.) a former Methodist evangelist. He started this prayer group in 1995 within the Methodist church in Kumasi. The ministers of the Methodist church later raised issues concerning the growing popularity of the prayer group. They felt that somehow, the church was losing members to the prayer group. A report by Sebastian R. Freiku on the 8th August 2013 spoke to this matter.

The church later instructed Rev. O.B to either stop operating the prayer group or denounce his membership in the church. He chose the latter and made it a non-denominational prayer group. It is the most popular, the fastest growing, and the largest prayer army in Ghana and the African/Ghanaian diaspora, where it extends its influence through online and oversea physical worshipping places. The group meets four times in a week at liberty house in Adum-Kumasi and has a bi-monthly all-night session at a space located at Abrankese on the road to Lake Bosumtwé in the Ashanti region. The site of prayer used to be a football stadium owned by Kesben, a brother to the leader of MOGPA.

Rev. O.B. reminisces that the group used to go to the Kumasi sports stadium once every month, but God directed him to move to Abrankese which is very far from Kumasi. He, consequently, relocated to Abrankese. He said God had promised to answer the prayer of anyone who would come that far for answers, even if it was an impossible prayer. O.B therefore, named the place, “land of impossibility.” Membership is not compulsory; people come from diverse religious backgrounds and are often encouraged to be affiliated in addition to their existing faith be they Muslims or Christian. The stadium in Abrankese is a privately owned marked sacred space. Members believe in the healing capabilities of anything they grab at the place — sand, grass, and leaves. Patrons also believe that whatever their leader

Rev. O.B., would lay his hands upon would be transformed into a spiritual material for healing or protection, so they carry water, olive oil, communion wine, fruit juice, toffees, apples, handkerchiefs, handband, stickers, watches, and scarfs with the inscription of MOGPA, to their meetings for prayers from their leader.

Items produced by the ‘commission-MOGPA’ are sold by members, who would go through registration, deliverance, and training before being allowed to sell. It is a structured economic venture; and those around the environs of Abrankese also cash in through the sale of food and other items to those who travel from afar to the meetings. An exciting feature about this prayer group is the ability of their leader to mobilize membership among Ghanaians and Africans across the globe. In a recent development, they acquired a land at Mfensi, large enough to enable them to organize all their activities in one space—church, bible college, and a school. They have called that sacred space a ‘land of Limitless opportunity.’ I now turn my attention to the next sacred site, the Atwea mountains.

### **Atwea Mountains**

The second fascinating sacred space this paper will examine is in the Ashanti regional town of Mampong and on a mountain called ‘Atwea mountains.’ This site interestingly does not belong to an individual entity or a denomination but a natural space that has been sacralised by its religiously diversified users. The mountain is a layer type and the layers are occupied by different religious groups such as the diverse strands of Christians, Muslims, Rastafarians, indigenous priest and others. A group simply clears up a portion of the mountain and claims it as it’s sacred space.

Patrons found on the mountains during the fieldwork said they come to the mountains either alone or with members as directed by God. Others said some spiritual battles are rather fought on the mountains just like in the bible. Some also go there due to the testimonies of others who visited the mountains. One informant told me of how he had heard that when one prayed on the mountain before starting a new church, he or she would easily attract a large following.

Based on the story he heard, he had come to stay on the mountain for thirty days before starting his ministry. An indigenous priest at the

bottom stressed that the deities instructed his predecessor to establish his shrine on the mountain for greater efficacy as the deities live in the mountain. He boasted of high patronage, even by the Christians who come to pray on the mountain. He said, “I offer help for pastors to get members, give them charms to mix with oil to give to members and power to perform miracles. Business is generally good for me.”<sup>5</sup> The different religious groups found on the mountain indicates that the religious site is a diversified space. There is a vast array of different religious groups operating within the same space, yet each one of them finds answers to adherents’ questions. Next, we look at Achimota Forest.

### **Achimota Forest**

The third is the Achimota Forest. Originally gazetted in July 1930 to create a green buffer between the Achimota School and the city of Accra, the objectives changed later, and it became a forest reserve, recreation Park, and Nature Study Facilities for children, students and researchers. Presently, it is officially an eco-tourism centre and an unofficial sacred space for the hundreds of prayer groups and churches who troop there to pray, the dominant users being the Pentecostals. In contrast to the Atwea mountains which is free, the forestry office charges leaders monthly and attendees pay daily at the gate before entering the reserve. At the gate, chairs are available for hire.

The reserve is organized into stations and it is numbered. A pastor could be at station A1, another at station A2, and so on. The forestry authority allows the religious sessions only on Wednesdays and Fridays. The users temporary hang their banners on the given days with ropes and remove them at the end of the day. The paraphernalia used by pastors could be stored with the forestry office for a fee but not in the forest because the purpose for the reserve is flora and nothing else. There are strict cleanliness rule and offenders could lose their spaces. In a way, this space is somehow restricted in comparison with the Atwea mountains, where access is free. The forest space has become a money-spinning venue. Forest guards receive money from all users of the facility. Apart from that, there are economic transactions between religious leaders and clients/members—I observed leaders selling

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<sup>5</sup> Komfoɔ Kojo Brenya, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah (Atwea, December 12, 2018).

anointing oils, apples, special water [some labelled] and the announcement of payments for special prayer for special breakthroughs. This site is a highly commercialized space with diverse economic modules applied by all and sundry.

The three religious sites have their distinctive characteristics that will be highlighted in the discussions of three themes that will follow subsequently. The themes are the indigenous religious traditions and Christianity in Ghana, sacralization and domestication of natural spaces and religious sites as economic midpoints. Next, I discuss the first theme.

### **The Indigenous Religious Traditions and Christianity in Ghana**

Christianity and its agents have commonly viewed indigenous religious practices as backward and evil, whose savage practitioners must be rescued. Meyer notes how “this Christian popular culture has quite successfully colonized public space, mostly in the south of Ghana where Christianity reigns supreme.”<sup>6</sup> Pentecostalism, a strand of Christianity alluded to the best thing that happened to Africans. What is not explicit is the contributions of the indigenous religious worldview of the African, in this case the Akan, that is furnishing Pentecostal Christianity with the fuel to expand.

First, the Akan believes in the duality of the world and their indigenous cosmology features a hierarchy of spirit beings with the Supreme God, *Onyame* being the head, the *abosom* or deities being intermediaries between men and God, hence the mouthpieces of God almighty, other spirits made up of maleficent and benevolent spirits and man<sup>7</sup>. Man is at the mercy of all the spirit beings and must worship them to earn their protection and providence. Secondly, the Akan believe in the duality of man--the physical and the metaphysical. They explain that God has left the care and management of daily affairs of the world to the deities. The deities inhabit the rivers, rocks, groves, forests,

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<sup>6</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Powerful Pictures: Popular Christian Aesthetics in Southern Ghana,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (2008), 84.

<sup>7</sup> Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra, FEP, 1978), 11.; Nrenzah, “Modernizing Indigenous Priesthood,” 120. John David Kwamena Ekem. *Priesthood in Context: A Study of Priesthood in Some Christian and Primal Communities of Ghana and its Relevance for Mother-Tongue Biblical Interpretation* (Accra, Sonlife Press, 2009), 32. Bolaji E. Idowu, *Africa Traditional Religion: A Definition* (New York, Maryknoll, 1973), 140-141.

trees, and mountains. As spirits, they need human vessels to carry out their tasks on behalf of God. In Akan religion, the priests and priestesses are the representatives of deities and God<sup>8</sup>. The Akan worldview about deities or spirits residing in rivers, forests, groves, and rocks demonstrate Edward Tylor's 'animism,'<sup>9</sup> which I agree, speaks largely to features typical of the Akan belief system.

The Akan's believe that rivers, rocks, forests, the earth, and sea are inhabited by spirit beings-that can help or harm them, hence they revere them. Guthrie elaborates this theory, viewing anthropomorphism as "attributing humanity to the world... *stressing that* religion consists of seeing the world as humanlike."<sup>10</sup> In three accounts which he develops from ethnographic, analytic and cognitive science respectively, he emphasizes that:

We find plausible, in varying degrees, a continuum of humanlike beings, from gods, spirits, and demons to gremlins, abominable snowmen, HAL the computer and Chiquita Banana. We find messages...in a wide range of phenomena such as weather, earthquakes, plaques, traffic accident and the flights of birds.<sup>11</sup>

For Guthrie, the propensity for attributing human physiognomies to nonhuman spheres is rooted in what we see and how we interpret it. This means that there is something behind the non-human objects we see, which implicitly refers to a force. The idea of some force behind non-human objects that, for instance, causes humans to sometimes get angry when one falls or hit a foot against a stone and even describe rivers as peaceful or a raging storm as vengeance is analogous with Parrinder's animism; they imply that "the spirits are the main ancestors and forces of nature: the powers behind the storm, rain, rivers, seas, lakes, wells, hills, and rocks are not just water or rock but embodies spiritual powers that manifest themselves in diverse spaces."<sup>12</sup> As such, the African fear or reverence for the inhabitants of these spiritual bodies is somehow validated by Guthrie and Tylor.

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<sup>8</sup> Nrenzah, "Modernizing Indigenous Priesthood," 121.

<sup>9</sup> Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 20-21.

<sup>10</sup> Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 23.



The belief in spiritual agency makes the Akan feel vulnerable and in need of cover from benevolent spirits. The Pentecostal discourse emphasizes the reality of these spirit forces. But this discourse demonizes all spiritual forms resident on the indigenous Akan religious landscape, while at the same time, magnifying the potency of spiritual power emanating from Pentecostal sources, as these are of divine provenance

The lucidity of the matter is that the African is terrified of the ‘supposed’ force in natural bodies that can affect him. The Pentecostal capitalizing on that mindset are offering immunity against those spirits and recruiting them into their lots. In other words, we could allude that the Pentecostal popularity and expansion demonstrates the enduring influence of deep -rooted indigenous religious understandings of the world and much so this worldview is shaping the ongoing Christian project of Ghana's Pentecostals.

A key aspect of the indigenous belief system advertisement for the advancement of Pentecostal Christianity rest on the fact that designated natural spaces such as the forest, rivers, sea, mountains which are spaces or dwelling for the indigenous religious spirits are being patronized by Christians and others. The interesting narrative for utilizing such spaces is to tap into the powers of God as the spaces provide meeting points between the divine and humans; and are avenues for fostering stronger links with the spiritual world and humans. –they are spaces for worship/sacrifice to those supreme powers. What is fascinating now is how Christianity/Pentecostalism paradoxically is feeding on the idea of the sacred in natural spaces as Christian, citing examples from the Bible to make a point (Matt. 17:1-8; 4:1-12).

Spaces such as the mountains, forest, riverbanks and seashores which are the dwellings of deities have been domesticated by human activities- in urban cities, those indigenous spaces have been turned to Christian sacred spaces. The spaces are believed to be fortified due to the presence of God and are “religious centres at which the heavenly and earthly meet, a means of access between the human and divine world.”<sup>13</sup> Why the mountains, rivers, seashores, or forest when those spaces are believed to be the ‘axis of evil’ — inhabitants of indigenous

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<sup>13</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 17; 375.

religious repositories which according to the Pentecostals are evil. We will discuss this controversy in the next section.

### **Sacralization, Religion Domesticates Natural Spaces**

Religious denominations around the world attach importance to Sacred spaces. In Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, for example, Jerusalem and Mecca are viewed as sacred spaces, respectively. Religious places or spaces are so sacred to religions to the point of even sparking controversies. We can talk of international sacred spaces and local spaces in the case of religious organizations that are cross-continental in orientation. Sacred spaces could also be permanent or temporal spaces. Chidester categorizes two properties of a sacred space—they are substantial and the situational. He relates the substantial aspect to Otto's sense of the 'holy,' Van der Leeuw's notion of 'power,' and Eliade's idea of the 'real,' all of which characterize insiders' experience of the sacred.

Chidester argues that the “situational aspect of sacred spaces connotes its connection to human social activities and is subject to human interpretation.”<sup>14</sup> Chidester's formulation furnishes us with a useful frame for describing the holy grounds of Atwea mountains, Achimota forest reserve, and Abrankese sites. His notion of the substantial portion of sacred spaces leads us directly to the holy grounds of the religious leaders and individuals who patronize those mentioned spaces. A pastor and prophet called Peter cited his reason for using Atwea mountain as an avenue to seek the face of God in an inaudible atmosphere. He had said:

My members and I travel from Kumasi to the Atwea mountains every month to seek the face of God. I think every Christian must withdraw from his usual operational space to a special place to have a conversation with God. If you are a Christian, you need to emulate Jesus by setting some days apart and yourself apart to have a quiet time with the creator. Jesus often went up the mountain to pray and teach his disciples (John 6:15). That is where his father God revealed things to him and where he fortified himself spiritually to deal with the task assigned him by God. As Christians, our task to evangelize,

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<sup>14</sup> David Chidester, “The Poetics and Politics of Sacred Space: Towards a Critical Phenomenology of Religion,” in *From the Sacred to the Divine. A New Phenomenological Approach*, ed. Anna Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 211.

heal the sick, raise the dead and so on cannot be achieved by sitting in your house eating bread and butter. The kingdom of God must be taken by force through prayers and fasting on this holy ground and for me, the Atwea mountain serves this purpose.<sup>15</sup>

The pastor's explanation of domesticating the mountain as a space for prayer or church, by going to pray with members resonates with Chidester's category of the substantial aspect of space which recounts Rudolf Otto's idea of the 'holy.' The fact that he thinks God's presence will be felt there and the power of God would be bestowed on him to do what he has been commissioned to do as a Christian is significant; but his belief in the fact that he will experience the sacred on the mountain top speaks more to Eliade's idea of the 'real,' which only the 'insiders' can know of.

Another pastor, who hosts a prayer camp in the Achimota forest reserve said that going to the place to establish the prayer camp was a result of a theophanic experience he had. He narrated that:

I had gone to the Achimota forest as a tourist, but my main reason was to have a quiet time to reflect on my life. The reserve is a vast area with stations, each station has numbers and letters as well and occupied by different prayer groups owned by churches and individuals. As I walked past group after group, I was surprised at how people from all walks of life trooped to the forest on Wednesdays and Fridays to pray. I went all the way to a deeper and lonely place within the forest. I was so tired, so I sat down to rest a little bit and drifted off to sleep. That short nap I had made me who I am today. I was not a pastor before this experience. It was like a trance—I was wandering in a bushy place like a forest and a voice called my name and said stop where you are. I asked who are you? The voice said. I am the lord God almighty. Immediately, I felt goose pimples all over. I just froze and could not question again. The voice said, I know you are young and have so many fanciful dreams, but I made you and I am commissioning you to go and tell the world about me. Heal the sick, edify the weary, deliver those in bondage and strengthen the weak. Stay where you are do not move, stay where you are, do not move and the third time the voices faded away. I woke up from the trance kneeling and sweating profusely. I sat for a while thinking about the experience I just went through and just almost immediately I started praying and blurting in tongues, I just

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Kwadwo Fosu, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah (Achimota Forest, February 10, 2019).

could not shut up and prayed for over two hours before gaining control over myself. Some weeks later, I fasted and decided to pray exactly where I fell into the trance in the forest. At the reserve gate, I saw about seven people in a group also going to pray. One of them was sick and unable to walk. The spirit of God ministered to me to pray for her. I held her leg and prayed. She received instant healing to the surprise of the six people and onlookers. They started calling me pastor and asked for my station number so that they rather come and pray with me. I informed them that I do not have a station and that I go a little further than everyone to pray. They volunteered to go with me and that day most of them got deliverance. We then planned to meet the next week to pray and they brought twenty more people making the number twenty-seven, this is how God decided to use me. I was a member of a certain church but since they could not contain me, I formed my church.<sup>16</sup>

The story of the secondary school leaver turned prophet Nortey can be said to demonstrate a hierophany, explained by Eliade as the “break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation.”<sup>17</sup> The same goes for Rev O.B. who is said to have received a revelation to relocate the monthly meeting of MOGPA to a football stadium at Abrankese which is far from the city of Kumasi and difficult to access. There were other places in Kumasi and Accra, but God chose the place he wanted; the forest and stadium, as a sign to validate the pastor’s call to the ministry of God.

Incidentally, the space is a place that was created for recreation, learning and preservation of plant species and soccer. A ‘secular’ space nowadays serving as sacred space for the diverse religious assemblages. Fascinatingly, the diverse groups in those spaces compete among themselves. They employ marketing strategies, using symbolic capital in the form of ‘powerful performances’ to be on top of the others. After the healing and deliverance, pastors must sustain as well as recruit more followers and clients — this depends on the spiritual capital a religious leader amasses to perform miracles and breakthroughs for the clientele/members; to achieve that and stay viable many prophets or pastors provide diverse services that speak to the

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<sup>16</sup> Prophet James Nortey, interview by Genevieve Nrenzah (Achimota Forest, January 8, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1987), 21.

needs of the clientele. The sacred space is an exhibition point, in that we see the display of potent spiritual power and the sale of tangible powerful protective materials that can solve mundane life puzzles, and through that act, gather recruits.

An important thing to note here is that urban centres are spaces into which new ideas flow and circulate easily. The lack of spaces in the urban setting for up and coming churches therefore prompts ritual agents to deploy their creative ingenuity in the utilization of whatever space is available, hence their (present preoccupation with transforming secular spaces into sacred spaces. Two reasons could be devoted to this domestication of spaces. Firstly, some of the natural spaces are convenient—for instance, the Achimota reserve is accessible to anyone from any part of Ghana and secondly, financially it is less costly to start a fellowship in natural space or an already built stadium which can later metamorphose into a church than acquiring a new land for the same purpose.

There is a paradox inherent in the transformation of these natural spaces into sacred realms. During Pentecostal exorcism, satan and his agents are banished to these very spaces-- bottomless pits, the forest or ocean. The implication is that these spaces are replete with demonic forces. All the same, Pentecostals justify the growing importance they are attaching to forests with the argument that God created the space and has power and control over their spiritual inhabitants. In other words, God's power can overpower to drive those spirits away. The pastors and prophets who are domesticating the natural spaces are of the view that the forest is serene and makes one have a natural communication with God. This explanation to justify the usage covers the other motive behind using those spaces which I allude has to do with convenience and money matters. In the next section, we will discuss the economic motive behind the usage of natural spaces.

### **Religious Sites as Economic Midpoints**

In Ghana, the constitution guarantees freedom of religion. There is a high level of religious pluralism because of the new situation, occasioned by diversified and divided loyalties or affiliations, engendering a free religious market — that could be described as a religious proliferation epidemic. New groups continue to emerge out of existing traditions, or new formations originate altogether, resulting in several

strands and shades of Pentecostalism. This sets out a culture of competition as they strive to get members/clients. Some label others as bad to place themselves above others.

Berger posited in 1960 that in a culture or society where the state and its agents have restricted power to sanction religious adherence, new religions, and worshipping cultures would emerge constantly, each presenting its most attractive image in a bid to win the loyalties of worshippers. He argued that the development engenders a free market situation in which religious groups and their agents compete for adherents and public patronage.<sup>18</sup>

Iannaccone, adding a new twist stated that “if individual denominations function as religious firms, then they collectively constitute a religious market.”<sup>19</sup> Muller describes the “distinguishing characteristics of religious organizations motivating a view of religious organizations as competitors...*considering* the sustainability of competitive advantages among religious organizations.”<sup>20</sup> Stark and Finke in their earlier submissions viewed the religious economy as a commercial venture,<sup>21</sup> but stated a new position recently describing a religious economy as a subsystem within religious activity, consisting “of all the religious activity going on in a society: a ‘market’ of current and potential adherents, a set of one or more organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherents and the religious culture offered by the organization(s).”<sup>22</sup>

By this definition, Stark and Finke imply that religious organizations are run just like firms where producers (religious organizations) exhibit their products for sale and religious followers are like consumers on a market shopping for religious commodities: they bargain and pay

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Berger, “A Market Model for the Analysis of Ecumenicity,” *Social Research* 30, no. 2 (1963): 79.

<sup>19</sup> Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Introduction to the Economics of Religion,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 36, no. 3 (1998): 1485; <http://www.jstor.org/stable>

<sup>20</sup> Kent Muller, “Competitive strategies of religious organization,” *Strategic Management Journal* 23, no. 5 (2002), 436; <http://www.jstor.org/stable>

<sup>21</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, “Religious Economies and Sacred Canopies: Religious Mobilization in American Cities,” *American Sociological Review* 53, no. 1 (1988), 42; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2095731>

<sup>22</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human side of Religion* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000), 193.

a price for what religious groups offer.<sup>23</sup> In the same vein, the strategies of religious leaders or suppliers of various forms of religious capital in *Ghana* are analogous to that of producers and entrepreneurs whose actions are calculated responses to the constrictions and opportunities offered them in the religious market place.<sup>24</sup>

The relative freedom of choice exercised by religious consumers urges religious agents to create different religio-cultural commodities and services, especially in countries with more “numerous competing churches than [in] countries dominated by a single established church.”<sup>25</sup> These producers will supply attractive commodities and services to their clients, advertise and market their products, fight with other competitors to maintain a portion of the market and keep a constant flow of demand for their supplies.<sup>26</sup> In such a free market, there is a tendency for a power struggle among the various parties involved. Admittedly, the religious leaders to outshine the others, are using marketing strategies such as the media in advertising for their religious goods and service and mandating members/clients to visit their designated sacred spaces.

These spaces are midpoints of economics and the production of counter discourses against the others, to stay competitive on a free religious market like Ghana where new groups keep springing up by the day. In those sacred spaces, they produce material essences such as olive oil, shea butter, porridge, milk, water, *yesu mogya* blood of Jesus, back to sender oil, *abayiefo nku* witchcraft cream and *patako gye ko* meaning stop fight and continue the fight to hold members. These materials sold by the leaders have often been speculated to have come from indigenous religious sources, often sparking a controversy or even division among Christians as conventional authority believes that the products as well as its sources are indigenously motivated.

A renowned Ghanaian Tele-evangelist Rev. Dr. Kofi Oduro of Alabaster International Ministry for example mentioned names of some neo Pentecostal prophets, labelling them as indigenous priests and not

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<sup>23</sup> Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Voodoo Economics: Reviewing the Rational Choice Approach to Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34, no. 1 (1995), 77; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/>

<sup>24</sup> Iannaccone “Voodoo Economics,” 77.

<sup>25</sup> Iannaccone, “Introduction to the Economics of Religion,” 1486.

<sup>26</sup> Iannaccone, “Voodoo Economics,” 77.

Christians and their practices of using tangible materials *abosom sem* that is, idol worship.<sup>27</sup>

The pastors who use such products have also raised counter argument that those tangible materials must go hand in hand to heal and protect the Christian against *ɔtamfo*, the enemy because prayer alone is not enough; there must be some powerful material to scare the devil. Leaders of these sacred spaces, prayer camps or churches have become sources and producers of potent spiritual power forms, somehow instigating a very fierce competition among them and pitching themselves against each other as consumers go in for the highest bidder. Clients or members pay for consultations, buy prayers and products.

The religious market model, in my view, analysis the strategies the diverse religious agents are using to carve a niche in Ghana's modern religious economy. It enables us to capture the creative ways religious groups exert to achieve visibility, access potential followers, supply religious commodities and also try to create and maintain demand for their goods in a somewhat unregulated Ghanaian religious economy, dominated by fiercely competitive Christian traditions

## Conclusion

I have shed light on the general context of the rise in the sacralization of space in Ghana and stressed that sacralizing secular spaces is one of the many strategies religious agents are using to compete in Ghana's increasingly volatile religious market. I raised three related arguments and supported these with themes. I argued that the current culture of domesticating indigenous religious spaces in urban settings confirms the continuing importance of indigenous religious influence on Ghanaians and its pervasive role in shaping the Christian Pentecostal project.

The attitude of cross-faith access in Ghanaian contemporary religiosity confirms two things that have been borrowed from the indigenous religious setting. Primarily, they have integrated indigenous religions utility base system into Christianity, that is 'solution is what matters' and an African in need will visit as many shines as possible until

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<sup>27</sup> Dr. Kofi Oduro, "Fire Rev Obofour and Other Prophets for Deceiving Ghanaians" (Ghana Tv One, January 16, 2019).



solution is attained—this is being replicated in current happenings on the religious market, where people visit every church or prayer camp they deem powerful till they arrive at a resolution. The second connects to the first that, in indigenous religions, the deities are not jealous, therefore one can hop from one place to another with ease to seek help and this seems to be the case, complimenting that indigenous religions are innate in the African and in this case the Ghanaian.

Again, I highlighted the tendencies of those religious organizations behaving like business entities and explained this with the metaphor of the religious market theory. Whiles sacred spaces proclaimed by the leaders as God's direction to save, protect and provide for his children using the leaders as vessels stands, the actions of the founders are deeply informed by economic motivations and competitiveness to be on top of the religious terrain in Ghana.

One striking finding was that the culture of people visiting sacred spaces to consult pastors/prophet or what I call 'spiritual father/personal pastor syndrome' is yielding laziness among the population. Praying to receive underserved 'favour' has plagued the religious landscape of Ghana, in that it is precipitating mechanisms by which the 'men of God' remain to be viable. Worshippers would rather go to them in those sacred spaces to pray for what they do not deserve or have not worked hard for than use the time to work physically.

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