



Heritage out of control: Is Libation a Prayer?

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January, 2022



Religion as Heritage in Ghana

In 2009, Ghana celebrated its 52nd birthday as an independent country with the usual pomp and circumstance. The parade was held at the Black Star Square - an imposing modernist monument commissioned as a symbol of progress by the country's first leader, Kwame Nkrumah. As usual, people from all walks of life



crowded the immense space with bated breath. As usual, too, the freshly elected president, John Atta Mills, arrived in a flashy vehicle amidst the cheers of the supporters. What was surely not usual about the festivities, however, is the manner in which the opening prayers transpired. Multi-religious prayers have inaugurated Independence Day ceremonies since 1957 when Ghana celebrated its first year as a free state. In the spirit of unity and tolerance, ritual specialists representing the country's main religions - Traditional Religion(s), Christianity, and Islam - used to be present for the occasion. At least, that was the case until 2009, when without prior notice, "traditional prayer" was conspicuously removed from the program. The party responsible for the initiative, as the public would later learn, was the president himself who evidently felt that the prayer was offensive to his Pentecostal/Charismatic persuasion. The term "traditional prayer" refers to the act of pouring libation - customarily a bottle of gin - accompanied by invocations uttered by a ritual specialist. The elimination of libation from the Independence Day ceremony reflects the shifting conceptualization of "traditional prayer" as "culture" rather than "religion" in Ghana's post-colonial present. Examining how and why a religion is "culturalized", in turn, speaks to the latter's standing in a given socio-cultural context.

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How did it come to be that "traditional prayer" had been incorporated in Ghana's symbolic nationalism in the first place? There has been much talk of the negative implications of the adjective "traditional" in relation to prayer, customs, or religion of African peoples. I resort to the label "traditional religion" exclusively when examining state and media discourse, especially in Anglophone West Africa, where indigenous religion is ubiquitously known as "traditional religion" in colloquial, official, and scholarly discourse. The choice can serve as an entry point for investigating the historical and ideological legacy of the concept, emphasizing the equivocal nature of the word "traditional," which Pentecostal/Charismatic denominations and the state frequently instrumentalize with both negative and



positive consequences.

Whether performed at a festival or the Independence Day celebration, libation, as a ritual offering to the spirit world, marks the act of entering in a reciprocal relationship with suprahuman beings. Nonetheless, libation pouring has long vacillated between the categories of “religion” and “culture”, a tendency significantly shaped by Kwame Nkrumah’s cultural revival program, “Sankofaism”. Inspired by Sankofa, the Akan symbol of a bird with its head turned backwards, the program encouraged reaching back into the past to forge an African identity informed by regional forms of cultural and spiritual expression. In this framework, the libation was assigned two distinct meanings.

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On the one hand, it was incorporated in the Independence Day celebration and other national functions alongside Muslim and Christian prayers to betoken Ghana’s spiritual legacy. The use of the word “prayer” in reference to the exercise corresponds to the aspirations of African-born theologians and scholars of religion at the time to disengage “traditional religions” from the alienating grips of the missionary narrative and to present them as upstanding cosmologies comparable to monotheistic belief systems.

On the other hand, libation pouring became an indivisible attribute of cultural display programs that pieced together visual and ritual elements of distinct communities to boost the sense of a common national identity. These “culturalized” renderings of “traditional religions” were informed by missionary and colonial attitudes towards African lifeworlds and significantly downplayed their spiritual dimensions in favor of their ceremonial and artistic value. Even if “culturalized” practices remain central to national identity, they are often watered down to “drumming and dancing” and are increasingly associated with entertainment rather than spirituality.



The second rendering of libation pouring as a “cultural practice” is far more established today compared to its religious counterpart. In fact, the Independence Day celebration is the only instance when “traditional prayer” carries an explicitly religious meaning. If “culturalized” renditions of the indigenous lifeworld allow the libation to be overlooked in “cultural” settings, the same treatment is challenging against the backdrop of the Independence Day celebrations. Here, the primary purpose of the performed prayers is to celebrate Ghana’s three main religions, and clearly not its three “cultures.” Evidently, the special antagonism reserved for the “traditional prayer” on this occasion arises out of its pointedly religious connotations.

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Independence Day is one of the most widely publicized events in Ghana’s history, both nationally and internationally. As such, it serves as the paramount occasion for communicating the country’s strides into “modernity”. The notion of “modernity” here is rooted in the dictates of neoliberalism and Christocentric secularity. It has been argued that secularization as an ideological process profoundly informed by post-Reformation ideals manifests a particular hierarchy of religious traditions with Christianity at the top. In the course of the colonial enterprise, these ideological connotations solidified into a racialized taxonomy of religions bolstered by missionary teachings, generating an apparition of modernity where Christianity and secularity coalesce. While Western secularity has discursively aspired to disentangle the public/secular identity from the private/Christian identity, in Ghanaian secularity, modern, Christian, and secular identifications overlap in public discourse. The tremendous popularity of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Ghana since the late twentieth century, with its emphasis on “leaving the past behind” in order to transition to a more prosperous future, further corroborates the already existing association of “traditional religions” with backwardness and obsolescence. Following from this, the “[Christian modernity](#)” that largely dominates the Ghanaian public discourse



today, especially in the capital, implicitly demands breaking away from African religions imagined as the domain of the devil in theological terms, and as “backward” in modernist evolutionary terms. In practical terms, the break also requires eradicating public visibility and influence of “traditional religions.”

The fret and agony that haunts Christians as they face the act of pouring libation at a public function is virtually existential. This is when the desire to contain the polluting effect of deities and ancestors overpowers the *de jure* secular ideals of the Ghanaian Constitution. While sweeping “traditional religions” under the carpet of “culture” allows for the maintenance of an aura of safety, its appearance among the country’s “religions” in a national context renders its spiritual dimensions undeniable. Media discourse illustrates the theological charge of the Christian position. Many newspaper contributors who applauded President Atta Mills’ ban on libation extensively quoted from the Bible to corroborate the moral rectitude of the decision. Among others, we [find references](#) to Exodus 20:2-3: “I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me,” and Deuteronomy 18:10: “Let no one be found among you [...] who practices divination or sorcery [...] or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does this is detestable to the Lord.” A less existential yet still intrinsically moral argument concerns the use of alcohol in libation pouring, a substance deemed sinful by Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians. In online media, defenders of the ban on libation have [argued](#) that deities do not represent good role models for society since they are all drunk from the libations, or because they corrupt [children](#) by encouraging them to drink alcohol.

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The reach and impact of the vilification of “traditional religions” go far beyond Pentecostal/Charismatic, or even mainline, circles. It also manifests in the nature of the defense that the practitioners mobilize. Broadly speaking, three arguments



are advanced in favor of performing “traditional prayer” in the framework of the Independence Day celebration: the state is responsible to respect equality and uphold religious neutrality, the country’s national culture needs to be preserved, and the libation as a practice is theologically consistent with Christianity. “Traditional communities” tend to rely on the third line of defense in this particular context while they underscore their right to culture as guaranteed by the customary law when advocating for contested “cultural practices.” When tensions arise with regard to festivals or ritual prohibitions, we regularly find newspaper articles preaching to stop the censure of the country’s culture, suggesting that in cultural heritage lies the strength and dignity of the people. In light of the Independence Day dissension, however, supporters of “traditional religions” rarely articulate their defense in constitutional terms, that is, by demanding equal treatment and visibility for all of the country’s religions. Instead, they endeavor to boost the credibility of libation pouring as a legitimate religious practice by arguing that “traditional religions” exist on the same ontological plane as Christianity albeit in a less sophisticated form. In these formulations, ancestors are completely removed from the discussion and instead, the presence of libation in the Old Testament is spotlighted as a sign of legitimacy. A prominent [Ga priest justified](#) the shunned practice in the following way: “Jacob poured libation [...] and then Moses was also commanded by God to pour strong wine in the Holy of Holies.” In other words, although equality of religions is enshrined in Ghana’s Constitution, followers of “traditional religions” rarely benefit from their right to religion when “traditional prayer” is framed as a religious exercise. Instead, they choose to justify the practice from a Christian point of view. This position, I believe, follows from the strongly pronounced Christian bias in the public domain.

The same dynamic is discernible in the statements of the few intellectuals and public figures who allegedly approach the libation prohibition from a secularist perspective, yet in reality offer an amalgam of the arguments discussed above. On the one hand, these individuals maintain that President Atta Mills’ decision clashed with Ghana’s constitutionally reinforced secularism underpinned by



interfaith tolerance and freedom of religion. Simultaneously, however, they speak of the “traditional prayer” as part of national heritage or enter into a theological polemic, insisting that libation is [not a “pagan practice”](#) as it is a means to reach the supreme and omnipotent God, or because “great [scholars of Christianity](#) do not see anything wrong” with it. The tendency to prove the worth of “traditional religions” by stressing their compatibility with Christianity, instead of arguing exclusively from the perspective of religious equality, betrays the deeply ingrained discomfort with public visibility of indigenous religiosity conspicuous across social groups.

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It is the outwardly religious association, as I have argued, that renders the Independence Day libation especially vulnerable to attacks from Christians. Although many Pentecostal/Charismatic leaders have long considered the practice paramount to “[playing with the Devil](#)”, this emblem of Ghana’s “religious tradition” adorned public functions until the “pentecostalization” of the public sphere. Even today, its inclusion in the Independence Day ceremony largely depends on the personal convictions of the country’s leaders. Interestingly, libation continues to figure uninhibited in celebrations that are designated as “cultural”, as in the case of annual festivals. Since the 1990s, the National Commission on Culture has been actively involved in the popularization of these “cultural” events, investing significant resources and workforce in promoting their visibility. Libations, along with other observances performed by ritual specialists, are an inseparable component of these initiatives. Granted, Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians, who are notorious for their condemnation of everything “traditional,” and by extension, “cultural,” continue to denounce these practices, yet their criticism is usually met with admonitions from state officials and ordinary citizens, who insist that “culture” is the backbone of the citizen’s national consciousness.



The libation debate is captivating because it speaks to the fluidity of the categories of “religion” and “culture,” and by extension “heritage.” This fluidity is perceptible not only across national borders but also across various public spaces within the same national context. Depending on the discourses that are being mobilized, a particular practice can be conceptualized as several different things. Observing patterns of apprehension and labelling allows us to acquire a more nuanced perspective on interfaith dynamics, religion-state relations, and public attitudes in any given socio-political environment.

Image: Pouring Libations (cropped), by [Sweggs](#). Found on [Flickr](#). (CC BY-NC 2.0)