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Hinduizing from the Top, Indigenizing from Below: Localizing Krishna Rituals in Southern Ghana

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Abstract

This essay reports on an aspect of Ghana's emerging Hindu religious experience; the localizing of the worship of Krishna, a Hindu deity and a globally circulating emblem of spirituality, in the context of the Radha-Govinda temple community in Accra, Ghana's capital. Representing the Ghanaian portion of International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), this community seeks to perpetuate the Caitanyite Vaisnava heritage in this African worshipping society by implementing its policy of 'Hinduizing' local communities. Local worshippers are receptive to this new religion but do not succumb to the pressure to become Hindus in ISKCON's sense. They are resilient and invest this cultural import with local religious meanings, pressing its rituals into service as spiritual ammunition as they respond to pre-existing challenges and the new limitations that contemporary social transformations have imposed on them. The essay demonstrates how the meanings of lay practitioners who we often assume to be powerless, rather than ISKCON and its powerful local elite agents, largely shape the trajectory of the worship of Krishna in Ghana.

Keywords

Ghana, Hinduism, Vaisnava, globalization, localization, Krishna, worship, Hinduization

Introduction

In Africa having the capacity to 'look into' and interpret happenings in the supernatural universe and determine how these can influence the life chances of individuals is a basis of power. The demand for this capacity has increased in Ghana, where people are overwhelmed by the unprecedented challenges globalization has triggered—a growing chasm between the rich and the poor, impoverishment, unemployment, and relative poverty. Many Ghanaians experience these challenges in terms of witchcraft, demonic possession, and the activities of a host of supernatural sources of evil and seek supernatural remedies for them. Likewise, people today are more willing than ever before to

experiment with new, unfamiliar sources of supernatural power that are becoming more readily accessible because of the continuous inflow into Ghana of new spiritual resources of alien provenance. Among these new resources, icons of Hindu spiritual power are attracting some attention. Presently Hindu ritual specialists have joined Pentecostal preachers, leaders of spiritual churches and prayers/healing homes and native ritual specialists in a fierce competition to provide forms of spiritual fortification and 'deliverance' for the growing number of consumers seeking spiritual power in Ghana.

My aim in this essay is first, to describe this emerging domain of Hindu religious practice in Ghana. Second, I wish to use the processes involved in localizing the Hindu god Krishna in the context of the Radha Govinda temple community to demonstrate a larger argument about the agency of lay religious practitioners in appropriating religious meanings imposed on them by elite local actors in Africa. The paper demonstrates how, in seizing the localizing initiative from elite actors albeit acting from below, lay practitioners play a more crucial role in shaping the trajectories of incoming religions in African religious fields than they are often credited with.

Ghana's Hinduism

In the larger towns and cities of Ghana, especially the capital Accra, several Hindu religious movements are currently actively recruiting followers from the growing population of urban dwellers. These groups include the Radha Govinda temple community, the Arya Samaj of Ghana, The Sri Sathya Sai Baba movement, The Akkanum Nama Shivaya Healing Church, The Christ Yoga Church, and The Hindu Monastery of Africa, to name the best-known groups.

The Hindu communities are not all the same. Some, such as The Christ Yoga Church and the Shiva Linga Prayer camp, are syncretistic traditions. Other groups operate on the model of the many *Sunsum sore* or spiritual churches and the prayer and healing homes in southern Ghana. Other groups such as The Radha Govinda temple community and the Arya Samaj of Ghana represent missionary-established Hindu religious groups, while groups such as the Hindu Monastery of Africa and the Akkanum Nama Shivaya are indigenously inspired and 'invented' versions of Hinduism.¹ These new Hindu 'churches', as they are sometimes called, have appeal in both rural and urban areas and to members of all classes. Their appeal, it would seem, is stronger in the larger towns and cities where their headquarters are located. From their bases in Accra and other cities the influence of some of these 'Hindu Churches'

have spread throughout southern Ghana through the proselytizing initiatives that they vigorously engage in, but also through rumors and the many captivating stories about their founders' miracles. The Hindu Monastery of Africa, arguably the fastest growing Hindu church in Ghana, has even expanded into neighboring Togo and Ivory Coast.

Vigorous competition among religious groups is a key characteristic of the urban religious ethos in Ghana. In this competition, the Pentecostal churches lead in terms of numbers and the influence of their healing and deliverance discourse. Ghana's Hinduism is by no means a force to be reckoned with, yet the flourishing manifestations of Hinduism are everywhere. Scenes of Krishna worshippers dressed in *saris* and *kurtas* and proselytizing at workplaces, markets and backstreets are ubiquitous in big towns and cities. Congregational chanting of *mantras*, often to the accompaniment of jingling *kartalas* (cymbals), *mridangas* (Hindu-drums), horns and conches, fill the air on Sunday mornings and evenings in the larger towns and some villages. The 'third eye', '*mantra*', '*karma*', '*gita*', '*guru*', '*namajapa*', '*mala*', '*Swamiji*' and other Hindu terms and expressions have become part of Ghanaian religious discourse. Individuals today keep domestic shrines in which they worship privately and display photos of protective Hindu deities and *gurus*. The practice of naming babies after Hindu deities such as 'Durga', 'Shiva', 'Saraswati', 'Aditi' and 'Krishna' is becoming part of what many Ghanaians now view as a modern trend.

The African Hindu religious experience is not unique to Ghana. In East and South Africa, where an English settler colonial regime brought in indentured labor from what became India and Pakistan, Hindu religious practices continue. However, because of longstanding mutual mistrust between the Indian diaspora community and the local populations, Hinduism has remained an ethnic religion practiced exclusively by people of East Indian heritage (Mbiti 1990: 252). There is a small expatriate community of East Indians in Ghana that practices Hinduism, but their influence on the origins and the spread of Ghanaian Hinduism seems minimal, since only a small number of Ghanaians are in this community. The majority of Ghana's Hindus are local non-Indian worshipping communities.

Because there has been very little research or even academic awareness of the local African appropriation of the Hindu religion, it is still not clear how widespread this phenomenon is in other West African countries. In Brian Larkin's (1997) analysis of the appropriation of Bollywood movies among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria, he locates the local appeal for this transnational entertainment form in the perceived similarities between Hindu culture and Hausa Culture. However, it is not clear from Larkin's analysis whether this

experience is inspiring the origins of Hindu religious forms in Northern Nigeria. In a rather cursory treatment of popular expressions of Hinduism in Calabar, Hackett (1989) also traces its appeal to its affinities with indigenous southern Nigerian religious traditions. This finding holds true for Ghana as well. Here there is a growing sense in some circles that if indigenous religious beliefs and practices are not revamped, the vicious campaign that charismatic churches are launching against them will result in their obliteration. Claiming that Hinduism is a modern form of traditional religions, some of Ghana's Hindus say their religious communities provide avenues for the expression of traditional religious beliefs, practices and sentiments in modern forms.

The strongest source of its appeal to followers, however, lies in the association of the Hindu religion with a wonder-working magico-religious power. Many people attribute this power to the original home of Hinduism, India, which has a strong reputation for magico-religious power and powerful medicine in the popular Ghanaian religious imagination. We can trace India's reputation for magic in Ghana to a local genre of narratives that recount encounters with powerful Hindu spirits and Indian medicine, from colonial soldiers of the Gold Coast who served in the West African Frontier force in India, Sri Lanka and Burma during the Second World War. According to these accounts, those who returned home were able to survive the war because they had access to Hindu spiritual power, a superior form of supernatural power. Drawing inspiration from this discourse, itinerant performers of magic on Ghana's local entertainment scene built their careers around the claim that they derive their magical powers from India, contributing in the process to this magico-religious power image of the Hindu religion.²

The founders or local leaders of Ghana's Hindu churches do not necessarily share the popular meanings associated with the Hindu religion. The leaders of the Radha Govinda temple community, the focus of this essay, maintain that Hindu traditions are just like Islam and Christianity, and the focus of their devotion is God, Krishna. However, many lay followers are motivated to join the community by the conviction that Hindu churches are more capable in general than their competitors in Ghana's religious field of protecting followers spiritually because their leaders have access to Hindu spiritual power. For this reason they are eager to put the rituals of the community to use as magico-spiritual resources, in spite of the hegemony's strict measures to protect the tradition from such indigenous religious notions and practices. In the process, lay practitioners gradually transform their newly adopted religious beliefs and practices from below.

In making analytical sense of the indigenizing of Vaisnava symbols from below, I find it useful to follow Foucault's reformulation of the nature of power

relations between elites, whose authority allows them to act upon their world through control over the apparatus of domination, and those they act upon (Foucault 1979). Foucault sees operations of power and resistance as widely distributed practices in hegemonic contexts. Power, he argues, is seldom imposed solely from above because those who are acted upon have agency and draw on their own creativity and ingenuity in appropriating the signs and process of domination from below.

Interpretations of the impact of globalizing processes such as capitalism, colonialism and missionizing emphasize the agency of local communities resisting or contesting such homogenizing processes. Ortner (1983: 84) prompts us to view the realities of local communities as responses or reactions to the external agents and processes of socio-cultural change. These communities, she argues, are subjects of their own histories. The invaders' signs and processes, Sahlins (1988) also suggests, are appropriated and made to fit into the cultural logic of local worlds. Similarly, Inda and Rosaldo in *The Anthropology of Globalization* argue that local consumers of global cultural inflows do not necessarily absorb the 'ideologies', 'values' and 'lifestyle positions' of the 'texts' they consume, but bring their own cultural dispositions to bear on such texts (2002: 17). While these frames help us in theorizing the indigenization of Krishna worship from below, I do not intend in this essay to simply superimpose a binary opposition that pits the domination of the Radha Govinda hegemony against the resistance of lay followers on this Ghanaian Hindu experience. Such analyses can be problematic since experiences that cannot be clearly subsumed under resistance or domination slip out of view (Cooper 1994: 157).

The localizing of Krishna worship in Ghana is a typical example of religio-cultural globalization. Caitanyite Vaisnavism has become an interlinked inter-continental (world) religious system that co-opts communities of local worshippers into a global religious regime. By transplanting and strictly enforcing its ritual forms in local communities, the hegemony seeks to homogenize this worship tradition, to make local worshippers Hindu, so to speak. In Ghana local communities receive this tradition, succumbing to the homogenizing initiative. However, they do so on their own terms, reframing the tradition and putting it to use within the very space where it is imposed on them. Following the lead of scholars such as Appadurai, who argues that globalizing and localizing processes, or 'global homogenization' and 'heterogenization', feed and reinforce each other rather than being mutually exclusive processes, I argue that the Hinduization of local devotees and the indigenization of Caitanyite Vaisnavism in Ghana are two faces of the same coin. My objective in the remainder of this essay is to demonstrate this argument in the context of the Radha Govinda temple community.

A Brief History of the Radha Govinda Temple

The Radha Govinda temple community, the second-largest Hindu worshipping group in Ghana, is the Ghanaian portion of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Also known as ISKCON, or the Hare Krishna Movement, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness is based in the United States, although it has a global following. The global spread of the worship of the Hindu god Krishna inspired the origins of ISKCON in the United States in the mid-1960s. Caitanya, a zealous devotee of Krishna, inaugurated this strand of Krishna worship about five hundred years ago in the Bengali region of India. Although Caitanya's movement experienced a decline after his death, Kedarnath Datta, a Krishna devotee, rejuvenated it in 1886, renaming it the Gaudiya Vaisnava Mission of India (Stillson Judah 1974: 40). Bimalprasad Datta (1874-1937) inherited the group from his father. Reorganizing it as the Gaudiya Math Institute for Teaching Krishna Consciousness, Bimalprasad expanded the group's influence by establishing monastic houses, publishing its teachings and engaging in missionary work throughout India. The influence of Caitanya's Vaisnava tradition spread to the United States when Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada (1896-1977), a product of the Gaudiya Math Institute, launched ISKCON in New York in 1966. Through this group, the lineage of Caitanya's movement has spread throughout the globe, reaching Ghana in 1979 through the missionary activities of five African American Krishna devotees. Crystallizing around these devotees, local sympathizers quickly seized the missionary initiative and have sponsored the spread of the tradition across southern Ghana over the span of the last four decades. Currently there are over twenty thousand Ghanaian worshippers of Krishna, comprising nine live-in temple communities, several worshipping cells scattered over towns and villages and individual practitioners or 'Friends of Krishna'. The Sri Radha Govinda Temple, located in Medie, a suburb of Accra, is the community's head temple in Ghana.

'Hinduization' and Domestication

I begin the discussion on localizing Krishna rituals in Ghana by describing the imposition of the Caitanyite Vaisnava tradition from the top, which I refer to as 'official Hinduization', before demonstrating the grass-roots appropriation or indigenization that is taking shape slowly and imperceptibly among the laity.

There is a sense in the Ghanaian public that the Radha Govinda community distances itself from the local community, the indigenous religion, and Ghanaian culture. Reflecting on this public perception, a young observer

commented: 'As for those Krishna worshippers, they view themselves as being above everybody else spiritually. They feel so pure that they do not even want to have anything to do with our customs. Nowadays they are even claiming to have become Hindus. They say they are not like us anymore'.

During a conversation with a high-ranking Krishna devotee at the group's *Jamnastami* festival celebration marking the birthday of Krishna, I inquired whether local Ghanaian religious practices had infiltrated the community's practices in any way. I was also eager to learn something about the community's plans to add popular local religious tunes to the Bengali Vaisnava songs they sang during worship. He replied very defensively: 'No! No! No! What local songs? What! Never! Krishna worship is a purely spiritual thing. It transcends culture. This is a purely Hindu thing and we must not do anything to contaminate it'. On another occasion I mistakenly referred to Simona, a member of the community, by his local name. He protested vehemently: 'No! I told you earlier that I was no longer Simona. Never call me Simona again! Sara Das! That's my name. That's my Hindu name and that's my spiritual name too. I am no more Simona'.

On a day after worship Padambadam, a female devotee, and I had a lively chat. I asked whether she considered herself Indian, after she too had insisted on being called by her Vaisnava Hindu name (Padambadam). 'Yes, I am', she answered. 'What is your caste origin then, if you are indeed Indian?' I teased. 'I mean I am Hindu, not East Indian', she replied. 'But what's the difference?' I probed further. 'Hindu is spiritual. Indian is cultural. And Hindu is higher, so I am higher than caste, because I have stopped eating meat and have become a Krishna devotee... I am purer', she explained, before going on to describe how she performed the appropriate Hindu birth rituals for each of the three children she had after becoming a devotee. 'They will even marry in this church according to Hindu customs. Even when they die, they will be buried the Hindu way', Padambadam concluded boastfully.³ My point in citing these instances is to demonstrate why the Ghanaian public feels the Radha Govinda community has distanced itself.

The official stance of the Radha Govinda community in Ghana is that the category 'Vaisnava Hindu' is not a cultural but a spiritual category, and it is the spiritual integrity of the tradition that the community seeks to protect from becoming 'contaminated'. What the Ghanaian public perceives as aloofness is therefore nothing more than a reflection of the community's zeal to perpetuate an authentic Caitanyite Vaisnava spiritual tradition in Ghana. The literature on ISKCON in the United States, the mother community of the Radha Govinda temple, describes a similar attitude of detachment from the host cultural and social environment (Daner 1976; Stillson Judah 1974; Gelberg

1989; Shinn 1989; Burke 1985; Gelberg 1983, 1989; Melton 1989; Shinn 1989; Turner 1976). Similarly, O'Connell notes how in their strictly devotional practices the Bengali Gaudiya Vaisnavas of the sixteenth century, the origins of this strand of Krishna worship, detached themselves fundamentally from their social, cultural or political environment (O'Connell 1993: 32). The category of 'Hindu', he argues, really meant nothing to Vaisnavas in a devotional sense though it had meaning geographically and socio-culturally as a reference to anything that was indigenously Indian (O'Connell 1970: 87). It would seem reasonable to suggest at this point that this distancing from the local culture in Ghana is a heritage of the Radha Govinda community's mother Caitanyite Vaisnava tradition.

My argument for Hinduization proceeds with the premise that the distancing of the Hare Krishna community from mundane culture notwithstanding, it cannot divest itself from the larger Bengali or, even further, its Indian Hindu cultural trappings. In spite of its unique denominational institutional structure and emphases in terms of religious symbolism, doctrinal formulations and ritual practices, Caitanyite Vaisnavism models and incorporates aspects of the indigenous Hindu socio-religious and cultural idioms into its spiritual culture. Caitanyite Vaisnava devotional practice is a strand of the larger indigenous Hindu socio-religious culture; the Radha Govinda community, its extension into Ghana, is distinctively East Indian. Conversion into this community in Ghana entails a *complete cultural reorientation*. In spite of the community's own insistence on being strictly 'spiritual' and 'beyond culture', it resocializes devotees into Hindus, in a cultural and religious sense, through ritual. Perhaps because the setting is culturally 'other', the Radha Govinda community's 'alien' Hindu cultural flavor becomes more striking in Ghana.

Conversion to the Radha Govinda Community as a Resocialization

The nexus of Hindu religion as a whole and indigenous East Indian culture has implications for the notion of conversion to Hinduism, especially when non-East Indian people are involved. Converting to Hinduism connotes a conditioning of devotees to patterns and customs of Hindu culture that is more than a mere switching of religious or spiritual affiliations. A stubborn emphasis on the devotees' strict adherence to Vaisnava culture in the Radha Govinda community of Ghana reinforces my point. The conversion process involves an orientation phase, normally lasting for a year. During this phase the community gradually introduces the novice to the tenets of the new religion. It observes the novice in order to determine whether he or she could

become an exemplary devotee. This culminates in an initiation, the *Hare nama diksa*, that marks the devotee's new identity as a Vaisnava Hindu. The new devotee must then make a complete break with the past, which means distancing oneself from one's immediate lifestyle. Involvement in mundane life traps individuals in moral wrongdoing such as drinking alcoholic beverages, womanizing and engaging in casual sex, being self-centered, smoking and other forms of inappropriate behavior. A new name that is Vaisnava Hindu, vows committing the devotee to the worship of Krishna, the reception of a personal and secret *mantra* and the commitment to a personal *guru* (spiritual master) are the other defining characteristics of the devotee's new Hindu identity. Devotees must demonstrate this identity publicly through the wearing of *saris*, *kurtas* and *dhotis* (traditional Indian attire worn by temple devotees of Krishna) and the marking of Vaisnava symbols on parts of the body with *tilaka* clay, a special kind of clay imported from India.

A further indication of the implicit Hinduization of the devotee is abiding by the rules of *asramas*, or Hindu stages of spiritual life, that all devotees in the Radha Govinda community in Ghana must follow. According to classical Hindu teachings, an upper caste male must pass through four ideal stages in the life cycle. From the stage of a celibate student (*brahmacarya*), he progresses to a married householder (*grihasta*), maintaining social order through production and reproduction. In his middle age he begins to withdraw from the social arena, moving into the forest in the company of his wife (the *vanaprastha* stage). Eventually he renounces this life and becomes a *sannyasi* or a wandering ascetic (Kinsley 1993: 7).

Bhaktivedanta, who introduced Krishna worship into the United States, stressed that to achieve spiritual advancement all devotees should abide by the stages of life in the classical Hindu life cycle. He modified the scheme, however, in order to accommodate the cultural needs of his American followers. Thus in all Hare Krishna temple communities the *asramas* apply to female devotees as well. In addition, all devotees are treated as upper-caste people in order to warrant application of the *asrama* rules. In the Ghanaian Hare Krishna community only the first two stages, celibate student (*brahmacarya*) and householders (*grihasta*), are represented.

The community's requirement that devotees use their Vaisnava Hindu names, its stubborn insistence on the use of Sanskrit during scriptural readings and Bengali and Sanskrit devotional songs during worship further reinforce the sense of its distinct cultural identity. The supplanting of traditional Ghanaian life-cycle rituals by Vaisnava Hindu rituals and the insistence on not eating meat, with its implications for Hindu notions of purity and Brahmanism, are further signs of the acculturation implicit in Radha Govinda ritual

practice in Ghana. The point of my argument is that to be considered a 'good' follower of Krishna, a devotee in Ghana is expected to adopt a Hindu cultural lifestyle.

That this tradition of Krishna worship represents a global religious system into which local worshipping communities are co-opted is reflected by the attempt of the hegemony acting in collaboration with local elites, to control local communities externally while insulating them against local influences. The tenets of Caitanyite Vaisnavism, as Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada interpreted it, determine what the community deems to be the 'appropriate' or 'correct' Hindu practice. Every devotee must adhere strictly to this tradition. A body known as the Governing Body Commission, the 'GBC', based in the United States is the most authoritative voice of the tradition (Daner 1976: 53). This body is comprised of twelve spiritual masters, called 'regional leaders', who are in charge of the twelve zones into which the worldwide following of the Hare Krishna tradition is divided (Daner 1976: 53). A regional leader is vested with the authority to determine where new centers will be established in his zone and what happens in these communities. He also ensures that the local temples strictly adhere to the tradition (Daner 1976: 53). At the time of my research for this essay, Swami Bhakti Tirtha, an African American guru, was the regional leader in charge of the Ghanaian worshipping communities. Prabhu Srivas, the president of the Radha Govinda temple, was merely a custodian of Caitanyite Vaisnavism and could not initiate any new moves. I proceed in the next section to demonstrate the synthesis of local beliefs and practices with Caitanyite Vaisnava tenets silently taking shape at the grass roots as lay devotees determine their own meanings and appropriate Vaisnava Hindu practices to serve their indigenous spiritual needs in spite of restrictions imposed on them.

Not Eating Meat

Becoming a vegetarian is a *sine qua non* for becoming a devotee of Krishna, and in Ghana this is strictly enforced. The foreignness or 'Hinduness' of this ritual practice is so striking in Ghana that it is considered by devotees and non-devotees alike to be the defining characteristic of a local devotee of Krishna. The prohibition of illicit sex and abstinence from alcohol are the other defining characteristics, but because other churches in Ghana abhor these practices they are not considered to be distinctly Hindu (see Asamoah-Gyadu 2005: 50). In the Radha Govinda community the expression 'to stop eating meat' is synonymous with conversion, and a conversion story typically ends with the devotee's statement, 'Then I stopped eating meat and from that

day I became a Hindu'. Many devotees then describe at length the difficulties they encountered in becoming vegetarian.

The theological rationale behind the Radha Govinda temple community's prohibition of illicit sex, alcohol consumption, and eating meat is the need to ensure that a devotee of Krishna exercises willful control over his or her sensual appetites. Meat, they argue further, promotes aggressiveness and a mental state of turmoil known as *rajas*, while a vegetarian diet promotes *satvic* qualities, that is, qualities that calm the mind. All of these are essential for spiritual progress. Stopping meat eating marks the devotee's radical departure from past sinful ways and is considered to be a necessary condition for attaining salvation or 'realizing Krishna Consciousness', to use their own expression. But as O'Connell observes about the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition that forms the foundation of ISKCON's theology, these prohibitions, especially the one regarding meat eating, also point to the community's commitment to the Hindu ideal of *ahimsa* or non-violence: 'The prohibitions against alcohol and meat are in fact expressions of the Gaudiya Vaisnava's revulsion against the taking of life and the readiness to do violence that are implied in the partaking of alcohol or meat' (O'Connell 1970: 181). In Hindu religious traditions, vegetarianism is grounded in the motif of *ahimsa* and is established as a dietary rule of high-caste Hindus. Classical Hindu teachings stipulate that the purest of all the caste categories, the Brahman, should completely separate from violent acts such as killing. Since killing pollutes the perpetrator, it compromises the ritual purity of the Brahman (Fuller 1992: 102-103). In keeping with this fundamental Hindu motif, the Radha Govinda temple officially prohibits the slaughtering of animals and the eating of their meat.

Not Eating Meat in Ghanaian Tradition

While vegetarianism or 'not eating meat' is not a common indigenous Ghanaian dietary practice, it is not entirely alien to Ghanaian people. A person may not eat the meat of particular animals for personal reasons, or because of food taboos. A breach of such taboos could result in dire consequences visited on the group by its deities or ancestors. Furthermore, a local Ghanaian motif cautioning against 'eating too much meat' resonates with and even reinforces the Hare Krishna tradition's stress on the moderation of diet. According to this view, too much meat, especially 'fatty meat' (*srade nam* in Akan), could breed a predilection for superfluity because of its tastefulness. This trait could easily incline a person to moral corruption. Persons who indulge in meat are described as "spoiled." A popular religious notion associating spiritual or moral meanings with eating meat holds that animals can transfer their

psychic, spiritual or even physical properties to those who eat their meat. People avoid meat that is considered physically dirty, ritually polluting or spiritually weakening. For example, members of many *sunsum sore* (spiritual churches) in Ghana do not eat pork because they consider pigs to be dirty physically and ritually. In contrast, eating meat can spiritually empower the eater. Worshipers of the deity Tigare eat dog meat because they believe that just as dogs protect their owners in real life, their spirit can also protect the spirits of dog meat eaters.

Notions about witches shape-shifting into wild animals of the forest and physically attacking human victims mark the witchcraft discourse in Ghana. Newspapers, popular magazines and feature films report stories of wild animals dramatically transforming into human beings after hunters have killed them. For this reason, people say witchcraft can infest meat from game, and those who eat the meat could become a witch. It is also said that before they die witches sometimes recruit their children, unsuspecting relatives or close friends into their witch associations by transmitting their powers to them through meat or boiled eggs. The witch can offer the meat as a gift to the unsuspecting victim physically or in dreams, which in Ghana are regarded as the contexts in which encounters between witches and their victims' spiritual doubles (*sunsum*) take place. Eating meat in a dream is often interpreted as a sign that a relative is transferring witchcraft to the dreamer. This local discourse on the spiritual significance of meat and eating meat largely informs the laity's interpretation of not eating meat in the Radha Govinda community.

When I asked some leading devotees during my field research why they did not eat meat, their responses reflected the official teachings of ISKCON—the notion of non-violence and the Vaisnava emphasis on controlling one's sensual appetites, of which they considered themselves to be the custodians. I present some of these responses: 'That's what we as Hindus are supposed to do. And it's a rule here'. 'So that we will be pure, because eating meat involves violence to animals'. 'It helps in developing self-control because some foods can make you become aggressive'. 'If one can stop eating meat one can abstain from anything else'. 'When a devotee is caught eating meat he could be expelled'. When I asked the lay members the same question, few pointed to Vaisnava theological reasons, yet the dominant theme in our conversations highlighted the ways in which lay devotees understand not eating meat in terms of local Ghanaian motifs. I present the literal transcriptions of our conversations here first to reinforce my argument, but also because they are the raw data from which I gleaned lay perspectives on this Hindu ritual practice.

One of the most predominant themes was the avoidance of meat as a precautionary measure against witchcraft attack or demonic possession. This

female devotee explains her rationale for stopping meat eating in terms of her fear of witchcraft attack:

Int: Why do you not eat meat in this church?

K: You see, as Hindus, they teach us that we should be concerned about what we will become in our next lives. You can become an animal like a goat, and just as we slaughter and eat goats, they will slaughter and eat you too. I would not like to do to any animal what I would not like to suffer myself, so I stopped eating the meat... But also... even meat, when you eat it, you can become an easy target for witches.

Int: How does that happen?

K: Ooh... There is something in meat that weakens your personality spirit. Meat can make your spirit become lighter in weight and witches and evil spirits will carry you away just like that [attack your spirit easily]. Stopping to eat meat will ensure that your spirit remains strong and pure.

Int: So what exactly is this thing about meat that makes the spirit dull?

K: Some of these matters are strictly spiritual. You cannot easily put your finger on the thing about meat that weakens a person's spirit. But I know that meat can weaken your spirit.

A mechanic from Teshie, a suburb of Accra, stopped eating meat because meat was a channel of transfer of witchcraft to unsuspecting victims:

Most of the ordinary animals we see around are witches and maybe that animal whose meat you are eating is a witch or has some evil spirit in it. The moment you finish eating its meat *pe* (stress) you too are in it. You too will acquire witchcraft. Like [for example] you have a relative who is a witch and she might want to give you that witchcraft. Normally she will pass it through meat. She might prepare a tasty meal with the meat and say, 'Come and eat' [invite you] and that's it. The moment you eat that food you can become a witch too... But when you don't eat meat they cannot get you that easily. Sometimes too some meat are possessed by evil spirits; the moment you eat that meat the spirit makes you its home. That's one reason we don't eat meat in this church.

Other views stressed the role of avoidance of meat in ensuring the purity of the body. This lay devotee argued that meat could ritually pollute or contaminate the body:

If human blood and animal blood mix up, the human body becomes contaminated and dirty. So that my blood will remain pure and not be contaminated with animal blood, I stopped eating meat. When your body is pure, you easily build spiritual power, but when it becomes contaminated it attracts evil spirits because evil spirits don't like a pure body, they are attracted to already impure bodies.

'But what is it about animal blood that can make your body impure?' I asked her. She answered:

Animal blood is lower in grade than human blood, so it is by nature impure. But animal blood sometimes has evil spirits and they can transfer this to you. The thing is this, when a witch fails to find a human victim on a hunt it will seek out an animal, suck its blood and infuse it with some of its witchcraft, so animal blood becomes polluted. The moment you eat the meat, you pollute your blood and your body.

Reiterating this viewpoint, another devotee said to me, 'Even you that are sitting there, a lot of meat can pollute your body'. Atsatsah Devi, a female, connected her ability to check her anger, a quarrelsome disposition, bitterness and cruelty after she joined the community to her 'stopping to eat meat':

A: Ever since becoming a member, I have become a changed person.

Int: In what ways have you changed?

A: *Hei me paa* [emphasis] . . . at first I was always quarreling. If someone insulted me one time, I would reply with three insults. If someone annoyed me small, I would fight the one [would get into a fist fight at the least provocation]. All the time, I would be fighting. In our neighborhood, everybody knew I was the wild one. In addition, I was very wicked and unfeeling. I could harm someone just like that. However, when I stopped the meat, I stopped doing all these things.

Int: So is it the meat you have stopped eating that makes you behave well?

A: Certainly! What else could it be? You can ask the other people here [devotees] who knew me before I joined the Church. *Eii*, now, I am so peaceful *paa* [emphasis]. Even my family members, you can ask them. Nowadays when they see how calm I have become, they are shocked. All this is because of the meat I have stopped eating. Now I have greater control over my anger, aggression, and all that.

Int: *Eiii* [expression of surprise] but how does not eating meat lead to good behavior?

A: I will tell you. All these traits like anger, aggression, wickedness, bitterness that are in us are from the animals we eat. Sometimes evil spirits carried around by the animals transmit them [the traits] to us. There are spirits of anger . . . aggression and fighting . . . and they are in animals. That is why animals are wild and cannot control their behavior. When we eat meat, we too behave in those ways because the animal spirits enter into us. Even if you eat meat you will be morally weak, you cannot overcome temptations, because just like the animals you eat, you will not have control over your urges.

Similarly, a devotee describing himself as a womanizer said stopping the eating of goat meat helped him to discontinue this habit. He explained the connection between eating goat meat and womanizing:

The male goat has the spirit of womanizing. Do you know why it always chases after female goats? It is always in heat. There is a spirit of womanizing in the he-goat. If you eat goat meat all the time you will always be after women, *fu be be be be* [the bleating of he goat in heat] just as a he-goat does. The spirit of womanizing will enter into you.

These interchanges and views suggest that in addition to the Hindu meanings, lay perspectives informed by indigenous Ghanaian and commonsense notions about meat strongly influence the laity's interpretation of the value of vegetarian practice and their Hindu religious experience as a whole. For them, the imperative to 'not eat meat' goes beyond their commitment to non-violence or moderation of diet. Not eating meat is a ritual process that mediates spiritual empowerment and protection, ritual cleanliness and the ability to lead moral lives.

'These Cows Protect Us': Veneration of the Cow

The temple community at Medie has twelve cows; all of them were imported from India, according to devotees each cow bears the name of an important personality or a deity in the Vaisnava tradition of Krishna worship. Kwame, an eleven-year-old Akan boy known by fellow devotees as 'cowherd boy', looks after the cows. There is a general attitude of reverence for cows, especially those at the Medie temple. Devotees bow slightly or lie prostrate on approaching the cows when they are out grazing in the field or in their corral. Some even clap their hands or ululate to symbolize their utmost reverence for the cows.

In the Hindu religious tradition cows are sacred. A devotee showed me a verse from the *Mahabharata*, a Hindu sacred text, that provides theological support for the belief; in it the author, Vyasa, specifically instructs cow veneration and spells out the benefits:

He who serves *kine* (cows) with reverence and who follows them with humility succeeds in obtaining many invaluable boons from *kine* who become gratified with him. One should never, even in one's heart, do injury to *kine*. Indeed, one should always confer happiness on them. One should always reverence *kine* and worship them with bending of one's head. He who does this, restraining his senses all the while and filled with cheerfulness, succeeds in attaining that felicity that is enjoyed by the *kine* (*Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, Section LXXXI*).

The basis of cow veneration in the community is the Gaudiya Vaisnava association of the cow with the divinity Krishna. A *Pujari* (priest) of the community explained this association: 'When Krishna appeared on earth he was a

cowherd boy... And even at the moment he has spiritual cows in Krishna *loka* (heaven). The cows that we see around are reflections of the cows of Krishna *loka*. A leader also explained how Krishna's transcendental names reflected his special relationship with cows. Krishna's epithets such as *Govinda*, meaning 'one who brings satisfaction to cows,' *Gopala*, meaning 'the protector of cows,' and *Bala Gopala*, meaning 'the child who protects cows' reflect this association of the lord with cows. The Vedic Hindu goddess Aditi is also identified as a cosmic cow, and her milk is identified with the redemptive invigorating drink *soma*, which nourishes creation (Kinsley 1986: 10).

There is some conceptual continuity between the Hindu attitude of reverence toward cows and the local Ghanaian totemic principle and practice insofar as the focus is on the sacredness of an animal. In Ghana lineages may respect certain animals or plants because they are considered progenitors of the group, or because of a crucial role that they played in the survival of the community historically, or in mythology (Sarpong 1974: 59). Another point of contact is the traditional belief that a totem embodies a community's 'spirit', or its life force. This is the basis of a contractual relationship between totems and their communities, and accounts for the worshipful attitude toward totems (Sarpong 1974: 61). In return, the totem protects the community spiritually. Unlike cows in the Hindu religion, in Ghanaian communities totems are not considered to be divine in the sense of their association with the Supreme Being. However, lay practitioners such as this male devotee describe their cows in terms of totems.

People who don't really know what we do here would say we worship animals, so we practice idolatry in our church. But worshipping cows is not sinful. It is not idol worship. In India, where our church originated, the cow is important to Hindus... When the lord Hare came into the world he depended on the cow for his livelihood. So for us this animal is divine. They too know something like God (have divine knowledge). But look at it this way too. We too have this practice in our villages and hometowns. We worship the animals that help us to survive or helped our ancestors before. We say the animals carry the spirit of the people around. That's what cow worship is like. For us, the cow is our totem. Don't you see what cows do for us?

A more striking sign of the local inflection of the meaning of cow veneration is the devotees' use of the cows and their by-products for supernatural fortification, especially against witchcraft and demons. Often the devotees gather in or around the corral to chant or simply to partake of the auspicious aura around the cows. On the day the spiritual master Bhakti Tirtha Swami was due to arrive in Accra from Sweden on a visit to Ghana, some male devotees chanted in the cows' corral for the entire day. One of them explained the

underlying rationale: 'So that any *obeyifuo* (witches) hovering around his plane would be struck, and he would arrive safely'. Another devotee said in Akan: '*Nantwie nso nim biribi. Womu tumi pam Honhomfi,*' meaning 'These cows too know something [have mystical insights] and they can drive away evil spirits'. Some devotees repeated the ritual on the day of the spiritual master's departure to ensure his safe return to the United States.

Kwame, the cowherd boy, spends a considerable part of his day filling bottles with cow urine for outside devotees to carry home. He explained that some devotees drink cows' urine (*gomutra*) and bathed with water mixed with cow dung for spiritual fortification. Some people drink human urine as a medicine that cleanses the body, but they say it is the physical properties of urine, not the spiritual, that effects this cleansing. However, appealing to the local Ghanaian motif that witches suck the blood of victims, Simona explained how drinking cow urine could protect a person: 'Because the cow's urine is bitter, spiritually it infuses your blood with that bitter taste. That way witches won't delight in sucking it'. When I asked some leaders of the community about these practices, they referred me to a section of the *Mahabharata* in which the sage Vyasa instructs sanctification through reverence for cows and the drinking of cow products:

One should for three days drink the hot urine of the cow. For the next three days one should drink the hot milk of the cow. Having thus drunk for three days hot milk; one should next drink ghee for three days. Having in this way drunk hot ghee for three days, one should subsist for the next three days on air only (*Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, Section LXXXI*).

Although bathing with cow dung and using cow dung incense are not indigenous Ghana practices, devotees dried and burned cow dung as a form of incense that repels witches and other demonic forces. Even worshippers and ritual specialists from the larger public heavily use this high-priced spiritual paraphernalia for ritual purposes.

A female rural devotee of Krishna described how she used the ash residue of the cow incense as an antiwitchcraft charm:

When I burn the cow dung incense, that ash that is left, I mix it into Vaseline, or *yokumi* (shea butter oil). I smear it on my body every time I am going to bed. It has Krishna's powers and it drives away the evil forces that would want to attack me in my sleep. I sleep soundly.

Another devotee, a young male, used this cow dung ash antidote especially at twelve noon:

It is best to smear it on your body at twelve noon. Twelve noon is when most evil powers descend. That's why when you teach a child something at twelve noon, nothing goes into his or her head. People who work in offices take a break at twelve noon because of this... So when it's twelve noon I smear the cow dung ash on my body and when the witches see me they run or fall.

A Pujari recited a verse by rote that instructed purification by bathing in water mixed with cow dung and attributed the instructions to the Hindu sage Vasistha: 'One should always bathe, using cow dung at the time. One should sit on dry cow dung. One should never cast one's urine and excreta and other secretions on cow dung'.

What struck me as somewhat strange regarding these practices was how the leadership seemed oblivious to the laity's underlying rationale of protection from witchcraft. When I asked one *Pujari* whether the practices ensured protection from witches and other agents of harm as lay devotees claimed, he looked at me, smiled and said:

You are still a *karmi* (an outsider) so you are seeing things just like one. You always ask about protection. The scriptures teach that vengeance against spiritual adversaries is not ours, it is Krishna's... A devotee's duty is to worship and love the Lord. These practices purify us and make us worthy of being the Lord's devotees. You *karmis* always do something for something, but here we worship God selflessly.

Similarly, another key member explained to me:

Don't read our local (he meant Ghanaian) practices into the things we do here. The things we do here are Hindu practices... They sanctify you and they make you pure for the Lord. So we try to make people understand them like Hindus. If we allow people to understand them in our own ways they will start doing things with these that will turn Hare Krishna worship into something else [contaminate their practices]. Here we try to keep the tradition pure.

Every now and then I would hear the temple president admonishing devotees during worship:

I will say this to you again and again. Do not come here because you believe witches or demons are troubling you, and you seek Krishna's protection. If that is why you are here, then you are being selfish. Your motive is not a genuine one. This church is all about loving God. If you long for God, Hare, like Radha longed for him, and follow his ways all the time, you won't even think about witches and demons.

When I suggested to another leading member that there might be devotees who were drinking the urine of cows or bathing in cow dung water because they believed these protected them against witchcraft and demons, he replied:

Yes, that is possible. But don't mind what people think. Some people here are misguided and they will do and believe all sorts of things. This religion's teachings are very complex and it takes time for people to really understand. So always come to us [the leaders] for clarification on what the true teachings and practices are. We are not saying witches are not there. But leave that problem to Krishna. He will take the form of *Nrsimha deva* and will deal with that in his time. When a person starts thinking about his own protection, then selfishness starts creeping back into his life. It is in the scriptures that these things, they make you pure and holy.

The goal of many indigenous religious rituals in Ghana is the need to ward off agents of spiritual harm such as witches, angry ghosts, demons and sorcerers, from human affairs. While the official position of the Radha Govinda community stresses the sanctification and purification of the devotee by the cow and its by-products, for the laity these are not ends in themselves but the means to an end, which is protection from the ever-present menace of evil. From the laity's indigenous Ghanaian points of view, the divinity of the cow invests its by-products with mystical power capable of mediating protection against witches and other sources of supernatural evil.

'The Descent of Krishna Sunsum': The Kirtan Experience

In the *Gaudiya Vaisnava* tradition the *kirtan*, the congregationally sung glorification of Krishna, puts one on the path to *sadhana* or salvation. Aside from providing a community setting for devotees to articulate their faith in *Krishna*, it generates a mood in which the devotee is transported to the spiritual world, at least temporarily. Here devotees taste the sweetness of the divine presence. A pronounced emotional or expressive dimension of devotion, the *kirtan* complements the sensually disciplined, even ascetic lifestyle of the community. Indigenous religious notions of spirit possession in the context of communal worship, not only inform the experience of *kirtan*, but also provide devotees with the vocabulary for articulating the experience.

At *Medie* the worship hall room is always full during *kirtan*. Devotees sit on mats on the floor, the women and children behind the males. A *Kirtan* usually lasts for three hours. Congregational reading and discussion of scriptural texts occurs before *kirtan* begins. In keeping with *Vaisnava Hindu* tradition, the leader first reads the text in the original Sanskrit from transliterations.

Devotees repeat each verse after him. He then reads the verses in English before his exposition, also in English. When the readings are over everyone gets up and roll up their mats, and the *kirtan* begins.

The *kirtan* hymns are exclusively in *Sanskrit* or *Bengali*; devotees have learned to sing them by rote. The singing begins slowly preceded by blowing of conches and jingling of cymbals. During this slow phase, the *pujari* (priest) bathes *Krishna* and the other deities, changes their clothes, and feeds them. He lights two lamps; two devotees carry these around so that others can have *darshan* (viewing) of the Lord. The tempo quickens after these rituals and continues to rise with the *mridanga* (drum), cymbals and conches reverberating. Different chants are included, each with its own tune, but the *Mahamantra*—*Hare, Krishna, Hare, Krishna Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare, Hare, Rama, Hare, Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare, Hare*—is considered the most important. When a song or chant ends, a leading songster introduces another and the group picks it up. The singing, chanting and dancing, combined with the strongly pronounced rhythm, can reach a deafening volume when the worship attains its climax and generates a mood of excitation among devotees. Devotees dance enthusiastically, leaping in ecstasy or surging back and forth in unison, hands raised. Sometimes the women ululate and wave white handkerchiefs, the traditional symbol of purity and divinity. At other times devotees hold hands and form a circle as they dance. *Prasadam*, fruits and flowers blessed by *Krishna*, is shared when the *kirtan* is over.

Some Krishna worshippers in Ghana describe the ecstatic emotional feelings the *kirtan* induces as the ‘descending of Krishna *sunsum konkron* (*Krishna*’s Holy Spirit),’ borrowing the vocabulary of the local spiritual church experience of the Holy Spirit ‘descending’ on worshippers. *Sunsum* means ‘spirit’ in Akan, and is an invisible being in or near a person, constantly protecting the individual. But among worshippers of spiritual churches *sunsum* is also an open space in the mind that can be occupied by either God’s spirit, called *sunsum konkron* (Holy Spirit), or the devil (*abonsam*) and his agents. Baptism ensures that the Holy Spirit possesses a Christian’s *sunsum* (Meyer 1994: 55-57). This connection is not permanent, but has to be realized repeatedly through praying and fellowship (Meyer 1994: 56). The excited mood that the drumming, singing (often comprising chants of ‘Holy Spirit come! Come down!’), dancing, clapping and ululating generates in the local spiritual churches induces the descent of the *sumsum konkron* (see also Ray 1993: 275). Signs of the Holy Spirit’s descent include rhythmic swaying of the body, stamping to repetitious music, clapping of hands, ‘ejaculations’, ‘poignant cries and prayers’, ‘dancing’, ‘leaping’ ‘and variety of motor reactions expressive of intense religious emotion’ (Baeta 1962). It is from this indigenous

experience that some Hare Krishna devotees in Ghana find idioms to express the excitation that *kirtan* induces, hence their description as the descent of *Krishna sunsum konkrong*.

The Hare Krishna community's *kirtan* tradition and the local spiritual church's experience of the descent of the Holy Spirit, though similar, are not the same, and leading devotees acknowledge this. In the local spiritual churches 'recipients' of the spirit describe the Holy Spirit in terms of an alien force that takes hold of them, guiding and controlling them. The spiritual church experience of the Holy Spirit descending involves the spirit possession of some individuals among the congregation while the feeling of the divine presence during the *kirtan* is a shared experience with no spirit possession involved. In spite of their description of the phenomenon as 'receiving *Krishna sunsum konkrong*', the Hare Krishna devotees' descriptions of their feelings reflect a somewhat different experience and their choices of words reflect the *Vaisnava* flavor of the experience. 'We become like the *gopis* all dancing with the lord at the same time and the feeling is something of a wild but sweet sensation', a devotee said, describing the shared quality of the experience. Another said: 'You sense an aura fill the temple during *kirtan* wrapping us all. You feel the Lord's presence yourself. But it's not as if we are possessed. Yet it's no 'ordinary' feeling. Something just falls on you *kplo* at once [grips or wraps around you]'. Devotees such as Jaratha, arguably the most enthusiastic female worshipper in the Medie temple community who reached particularly high states of excitation, during *kirtans*, would rest and regain their composure before continuing. Jaratha would dance continuously, leap high, and scream in Pidgin English, 'Ooh, I go die, I go die for Krishna [I will die for Krishna]', pause for a while, then jump into the action again.

A key devotee described the theology of the experience, pointing to its transcendental and physical quality:

Your *sunsum* and *Krishna sunsum* used to be in the same transcendental realm but they became separated because of your sins... Calling the names of God during *kirtans* connects you to him. It's a transcendental state in which your *sunsum* remembers all those pastimes with the lord. But the soul, not the body, is involved in this. The only thing you feel is the excitation in you and sometimes this can be quite intense, though not violent. You can feel goose pimples all over your body.

Another devotee struggled with terms to describe it: 'It's not easy to describe, unless you've felt it yourself. Maybe... let's say it's like that feeling, when you meet someone you really really like... or like you have a date with your lover and you simply can't wait... that kind of feeling. It is inside you. But you feel it on your body too'.

In the community's description of the *kirtan* in the idiom of 'the descending of the spirit,' they invest a sixteenth-century Bengali Hindu religious experience with meanings deriving from the local spiritual church experience. The original *Vaisnava Hindu* meaning of the *kirtan* experience is not entirely lost, however, since the 'descending of *Krishna sumsum*' is also described as a unique kind of descent and this uniqueness is expressed in *Vaisnava* theological and experiential terms: sweetness, intensity, inner feeling and tingling in the body. The *kirtan* experience of Ghanaians therefore bears the hallmarks of Christian, traditional religious and Hindu influences.

Rural Indigenization

Another sign of the synthesis of Hindu and local Ghanaian beliefs from below is a form of trial by oracle ritual that I observed developing among lay worshippers, especially those in rural communities. This ritual involved the use of Hindu ritual paraphernalia. The trial by oracle is a popular Ghanaian religious practice in which a ritual specialist can determine through a form of divination whether an individual suspected of a moral breach is innocent or guilty. It involves the manipulation of ritual paraphernalia such as a crucifix, candle, Bible, cowries' shells, the Holy Koran or other scriptural texts. In some instances a suspect may be required to go through an ordeal, the open expression of pain indicating his or her guilt.

I observed a form of this ritual taking shape in a Hare Krishna village community in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The trial took place in the home of Asempa, a devotee whose domestic shrine was the venue for the village community's trials. It involved Aboagye, a young male accused of stealing money belonging to his roommate, Sintim, also male. They both claimed they were devotees of *Krishna*. In front of a laminated photo of *Krishna* inclined against a wall of the shrine were a horsetail, three burning candles, a bowl of holy water, *japa* beads, a copy of the *Gita* and a key. The scent of incense pervaded the room. The ritual began with Asempa silently reciting a series of *mantras*. He then tied a chord around the *Gita* to the head of the key. He held the key upside down and the *Gita* dangled at the other end of the chord. He waited until the suspending *Gita* was motionless. He then presented the case before '*Gita*,' addressing it as if he was talking to a person:

Ooh, *Gita* we have brought a matter before you. Sintim sitting here [he points to him] thinks Aboagye sitting there has his money. Aboagye insists he is innocent. We whose minds have limits cannot determine the truth in this matter. Therefore, we have brought this matter before you. You know the minds and hearts of human beings. If

Aboagye is guilty, *Gita*, you know what to do. However, if he is innocent, you know what to do.

If the *Gita* remained motionless, it pointed to Aboagye's innocence. A slight turning of the *Gita* did not necessarily mean guilt but some complicity of Aboagye in the theft. The rapid spinning of the *Gita* at the end of the chord in a clockwise direction would indicate Aboagye's guilt. For a while, nothing happened. Then the *Gita* began to spin. At first it was slow but soon it gathered speed and spun around rapidly, pointing to Aboagye's guilt. I looked on questioningly, very skeptical though careful not to let this be conveyed in my facial expression. However, when a tearful Aboagye sank to his knees, confessed, and begged Sintim to forgive him, I too began to have some 'faith' in the *Gita's* ability to pass correct judgment. I would later learn that this ritual was practiced widely, especially among the village Hare Krishna cells, although it was not an accepted official practice of the community. I have heard stories about individuals tapping the *Gita's* powers to achieve other material goals—heal the sick, ward off evil, incapacitate competitors and predict future events.

Because modernity has failed to deliver on its promises—wealth for all, good health, access to avenues of upward mobility, a sense of security, certainty and so on—African communities are turning to ritual apparatus, spaces and persons with the capacity to probe the unseen universe for supra-mundane means of controlling, explaining and predicting their lives. To meet their spiritual needs, some individuals in Ghana experiment with spiritual power sources themselves. Some of these people appropriate religious objects and images such as scriptural texts, oils, deities or parts of animals that are flowing in as part of a global circulation, invest them with meanings of power and deploy these powers to mitigate their daily challenges. Some individuals have even transformed the Internet into a kind of magical space. Through e-mails and instant messages, they transmit magical spells to 'rich men' and 'rich women' in Europe and America, with the intent to have them send them large sums of foreign currency. This is the context within which we must understand the adoption and adaptation of the Bhagavad-Gita, a Hindu sacred text, as a channel into the occult. The *Gita's* growing reputation in Ghana as a repository of the wonder-working magico-religious power of Hinduism lends it to such usages.

Conclusion

Contributors to *Situating Globality*, a volume devoted to analyses of African responses to globalization, invariably demonstrate how local African communities

have a greater control over the continent's trajectory of globalization than is often assumed. This theme underlies my analysis here of the inflow of Vaisnava religious symbols and their local adoption and interpretation in Ghana essay. I have argued that in joining the Radha Govinda temple community, lay devotees of Krishna in Ghana are driven by local concerns—already existing and newly emerging—that they consider to be more pressing than preserving the purity of Caitanya's heritage. An important issue is the need to revamp indigenous traditional religious practices whose influences, they feel, are gradually crumbling under the weight of global forces. Devotees are inspired by the wide vista of resonances between the indigenous map of the universe and Vaisnava Hindu perspectives to turn to Krishna worship for the rescuing of indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Diagnosing Ghana's socio-economic malaise as spiritual and believing that India's religions offer superior supernatural remedies, others draw from the powers of Krishna rituals to combat witchcraft, sorcery and other supernatural causes of harm. These local lay worshippers of Krishna are resilient in the face of the homogenizing agenda of the exogenously controlled ISKCON hegemony. Acting from their vantage points as the final recipients of the tradition, they assume a share in the shaping of the Ghanaian trajectory of its globalization. In a development that stands in sharp contrast to ISKCON's mission to create replicas of Caitanya's heritage all over the globe, Ghanaian Krishna worship practices are essentially a form of African Hinduism.

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Notes

1. There are only subtle differences between ISKCON and other official Hindu organizations, and purely African groups such as the Hindu Monastery of Africa. Many of the official Hindu organizations were established through missionary activity and are exogenously controlled, while the African Hindu groups are locally inspired. Also, while the official Hindu communities officially distance themselves from Ghanaian culture, claiming to be authentic Hindu temples, the purely African Hindu groups openly embrace indigenous African religious practices and often argue that Hinduism is a modern expression of African religions.

2. For a detailed discussion of this development, read my forthcoming essay 'I Conjure You up by the Powers of India. Appear before My Eyes: Constructing Images of India and Producing Hindu Spiritual Power in Popular Ghanaian Religious Discourse', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

3. The prescribed mode of disposal of dead bodies in the community is cremation. However, this is seldom practiced because the customs of many Ghanaian ethnic groups abhor cremation, and relatives are often reluctant to allow the community to perform Hindu rituals in handling the bodies of dead family members. The community and families of deceased members often reach a compromise whereby the community performs Hindu rituals associated with the dead and releases the body to family members for burial. Padambadam may have been referring to this process.