The pastor pours drinking water, but claims that it’s holy water.

—Rap lyrics, Grey of the Mobile Boys

Over the past two decades, Charismatic preaching has become a powerful form of public speaking around the globe, as megachurches and televangelists have arisen from Sweden to Seoul to Harare (cf. Coleman 2000; Schulz 2002; Van de Port 2006; Van der Veer 1996). As with other fundamentalist movements, members claim moral and spiritual authority to challenge established legal and political order. In Ghana, structural and moral tensions around state privatization fostered the rise of Charismatic churches (Gifford 1998, 2004; Meyer 2004a). Their “prosperity doctrines” promise economic success through prayer, emphasizing modes of performativity that morally validate an entrepreneurial subject (Hackett 1999). The glamorous sheen of successful pastors links the presence of the Holy Spirit to promised wealth for congregations drawn from disenfranchised masses with little access to material value. Promises of economic salvation, however, breed anxieties about assessing genuine spiritual power and material value. And frequent scandals about pastors’ financial indiscretion and sexual misconduct raise the specter of spiritual trickery. In the quotation that begins this essay, Grey, a young Ghanaian rap artist, critiques a pastor for lying about liturgy’s purity. This pop song questions spiritual transformation, joking that when a pastor claims to use holy water it might be plain tap water. The slippage of sacred into profane points to societal anxieties about belief and morality across public life.
This essay traces the emergence of a sphere of moral deliberation in contemporary Ghana in which the fake pastor—and fear of fakery—plays a dynamic and productive role. The rise of call-in radio talk shows, the mobile phones that underpin them, and the religious conversion of comedian and musicians are part of the story, as are tensions between IMF-sponsored privatization and ideals of a pan-African state. This sphere has emerged in a neoliberal context in which self-determination, choice, and entrepreneurialism are valorized, even while opportunities for prosperity have been dramatically undercut. Pastors and comedians are parallel figures who provoke public moral discourse through various kinds of storytelling. While the pastor presents both the ideal and the threat of the neoliberal, the comedian parodies this figuring. New communication technologies have sped up exchange and circulation of moral commentary, although they rely on established values of indirect speaking. A vital and pervasive Neo-Pentecostalism in Ghana and Africa is well documented. What I highlight in relation to these religious movements is the logic through which fear of the fake is constitutive of the force of spirituality, and of a sphere of moral deliberation where key contradictions of neoliberalism and postcoloniality are enacted. The deliberation I describe centers on the evaluation of sincerity and fakeness in performance. Perhaps the greatest fear to emerge in these discernments is that the distance between real and fake, moral and immoral might collapse.

Charismatism’s permeation of popular entertainment and public life breeds anxieties that fake spirituality is used for entrepreneurial success. Fake pastors are sometimes referred to as *osofo meko*, literally meaning pepper pastor. As one university student and volunteer Sunday school teacher explained to me, “Some of these so-called men of God would put hot pepper in your eyes to deceive you.” As the potential to “get the Holy Spirit” is democratized, public attention focuses on assessing spiritual power’s authenticity.

“Prosperity doctrines” promise sacred access to entrepreneurial success in which a spiritual exchange—the gift of the Holy Spirit—parallels desired financial exchange. Fakery appears as the margin, the horizon against which a moral center is clarified (Derrida 1988). The fake is not a negation of value but, rather, a critical comment on it. Assessing fakery in performance is at the center of a sphere of moral deliberation that is not defined by a particular medium. It moves across radio, television, theater, comedy, preaching, and music, as both lament and entertainment. These performances provoke forms of speech that simultaneously legitimize and question the potential of a spiritually validated entrepreneur.
Both charismatic preachers and comedians use oratory styles that resonate with older political and popular styles of speaking and listening. The linkages between pastors, comedians, and fakes and the emergence of a sphere of moral deliberation rely on the trickster at the center of Ghanaian speech culture. Ghana Boy, a comedian who figures a number of times in events described below, once explained to me backstage at the National Theater that popular comedy emerges from Ananse trickster storytelling, but that increasingly performances are understood in relation to Charismatic preaching. “We comedians are like pastors; we are there to entertain and to impart moral lessons to the public. We are all tricking the audience for them to enjoy and learn lessons at the same time.”

Akan speech culture emphasizes creative aspects of language mediation and circulation. In traditional Akan chiefly courts eloquent indirect speech is valued for both accentuating and deflecting political and social power of words (Yankah 1995). Ananse trickster storytelling (Anansesem) focuses on indirect, proverbial morality tales (Cole 2001:109). Ananse the spider is a hero–charlatan whose greed gets him in trouble. It is said that Ananse loves to eat but does not like to work. Trickery is morally condemned but is also the basis for creative wordplay and the potential for wealth without work. Linking character to narrator, storytelling events often begin with the storyteller calling, “Anansesem ye sisi!” [Ananse storytelling, we are here to trick you!]. Audiences respond with a dare “Sisi me! Sisi me!” [Trick me! Trick me!]. Audiences are conditioned as active listeners, distinguishing morality lessons from seductive speech. Anansesem in rural villages involved singing, joking, and dancing and was the basis for the development of concert party variety theater and highlife guitar bands in mid-20th-century Gold Coast (Sutherland 1975). The trickster is the prototype for the comedian (Cole 2001:109), but charismatic preachers also rely on the trickster sensibility that permeates popular discourse.

STATE POWER, STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT, AND THE RISE OF CHARISMATIC CHURCHES

In Ghana, political and religious transformation have been closely intertwined (Debrunner 1967). In 1979, after years of public frustration over state corruption and economic instability, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings took power in a short-lived coup. He was popularly described as a Christ-like savior referred to as “Junior Jesus.” When Rawlings again took power in 1981, national newspapers described him in terms of the Christian messiah with headlines, “Second Coming of Rawlings!” Over time the public became critical of Rawlings’s regime and “Junior Jesus” quickly became “Junior Judas.” Rawlings’s government encouraged
Ghanaians to eschew foreign commodities and presented collective moral discipline as a solution to neocolonial economics. Soldiers whipped market women who hoarded goods and used food shortages to make a profit, arguing that national development was more important than personal gain. Drought, fuel shortages, currency instability, loss of cocoa crops, and the sudden return of one million Ghanaians from Nigeria all contributed to near economic collapse. Attempts to centralize and build productive capacity were challenged by the state’s empty coffers, and in 1983 Rawlings’s financial advisers struck a deal with the IMF entering a Structural Adjustment Program. Significantly, although the state continued to publicly espouse a vision of centralized African socialism, its policies began to do the opposite.

Structural adjustment in the 1980s across the globe brought IMF and World Bank financial support in exchange for agreements to privatize institutions, open markets to foreign capital, and “Americanize” governance. Restructuring fostered service industries and consumer practices as engines of economic growth. Several competing publics emerged, most notably Charismatic churches, roots and education tourism, hip hop–hiplife music and video-film entertainment, and transnational remittance networks. Charismatic Christianity provided spiritual language for this shift, morally validating marketization. Orthodox–missionary denominations, older Pentecostals, and Spiritual–African Independent Churches (AIC) began to lose membership as converts turned to Neo-Pentecostals (Meyer 2004b).

As Charismatism took hold, young men left established churches to form new ministries; other non-Christians, mostly uneducated, were also called by God. Numerous small congregations emerged around young leaders claiming the Holy Spirit’s presence. In the 1980s Reverend Vagalas, who describes himself as a “former witchdoctor” who “received the Holy Spirit,” founded Lord’s Vineyard International Ministries and became renowned for healing, deliverance, and fighting demons “in the spiritual realm.” He explained to me that whereas spiritual leadership in orthodox churches was restricted to those who long been part of church hierarchy, younger Christians felt faith should not be mediated through official institutional channels but, rather, that each “individual has a direct spiritual relationship with the Holy Spirit.” John Ghartey, a teacher at Action Faith Ministries Bible College, recalled, “We in schools felt that we wanted a new direction for the churches. . . . The older generation had nothing to tell us.” Theological critiques arose out of Bible study groups within established churches, church fellowships, and secondary school religious associations. Brew Riverson Jr., a film and television actor and born-again Christian who is the son of a minister, recalled that for youth growing up
in the 1980s “charismatic preaching addressed contemporary concerns of spiritual and moral poverty. But gave us the belief and power to make our own future” (interview, Brew Riverson Jr., January 2000).

New churches also provided basic community needs. The impoverished state failed to provide social services, although it remained tied to ideals of centralization that prevented the private sector from fulfilling basic needs. As one member of Christian Action Faith Ministries International said to me, he joined because “it is community.” Churches, with the aid of tax-exempt status, rose through membership donations. Congregations bought land, built churches, and supported the clergy. Members received mail and telephone calls through church offices. In addition, medical procedures, education, marriages, and, in particular, costly funerals were supported. Churches took up older forms of informal collective savings schemes so members could pool resources. As another member explained, “If someone dies, Charismatic churches are there to help with the funeral. [Orthodox] churches are more rigid in their membership. You have to find someone who is a long-time member and beg them to help arrange funerals. For younger people without money, Charismatic churches are more humane. Young and poor members are willing to give because they feel their money is building something and they have a voice. They are a part of something dynamic, you know?” (cf. Addae-Mensah 2000).

Although many orthodox churches were critical of Rawlings’s socialist tendencies, young Christians initially supported his vision of moral discipline and generational change. Hierarchical control of orthodox churches came to be seen as part of endemic social mismanagement reflecting the colonial mentality of the older generation. However, new religious movements were soon seen as a threat to state sovereignty. Whereas orthodox churches emphasize the authority of institutional mediation, Charismatic preaching invokes a direct relationship between worshiper and spiritual authority (Engelke 2004).

REGULATING GHANAIAN CHURCHES

Charismatism as a dominant aspect of public life was spurred by the state’s failed attempts to regulate religious institutions. The state unintentionally gave new churches moral legitimacy by positioning them as an alternative to state control. In 1989, a Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Law 221 Religious Bodies Registration Act “required all religious bodies to register with the National Commission on Culture [NCC]” (Nugent 1995:188). Mohammed Ben Abdallah, Chairman of the NCC, argued for state regulation of Pentecostal denominations,
which were “not well organized or grounded within the religious traditions of the
country” and that appeared at such a rapid rate that “the government could not keep
track of them.” For government, Law 221 was not aimed at regulating religious
freedom, per se, but addressed the “threat” of religious movements to national
culture. Rights to free expression came into conflict with the state’s attempt to
protect “cultural integrity” from foreign influence.

In an August 1989 speech, at the opening of the Association of Episcopal
Conferences of Anglophone West Africa, Rawlings stated that “the church must
join in the struggle to emancipate the oppressed and to create a new order of
justice.” Rawlings also expressed distress at the immorality of wealth:

The world in which the youth live . . . is characterized by ugly contradictions,
wealth, overconsumption, and seemingly unlimited opportunities for a tiny
minority whilst the majority are doomed to deprivation and cannot meet
their very basic needs. . . . With the immense advances in communications
such as video, satellite TV, etc., our youth see the hypocrisy of international
figures of power and influence. . . . We learn that success means not getting
cought, that beauty and respectability have no local reference points and only
have to do with external foreign things. . . . Are we ready to admit that the
tentacles of this evil have reached the core of our religious and Christian
traditions?

NCC Chairman Mohammed Ben Abdallah recalled: “The use of electronic
media by new churches and the flashy styles of Charismatic leaders really concerned
some in government. It was not as much specific cases of corruption as the sense
that these were not African-oriented movements and they praised individual wealth
as if it was a positive moral attribute” (interview, Mohammed Ben Abdallah,
January 2000). Rawlings emphasized the state’s right to regulate church financial
relations.

Do we realize that our refusal to condemn our silence about those of our
own church members who flaunt ill-gotten wealth is contributing to the
society’s inability to restore spiritual values. . . . [Church leaders] admit and
I quote, “We do not question the right or duty of government to check
any activity which goes against public decency and morality, promotes the
financial exploitation of believers, endangers public peace or compromises
national unity and honor.”

I would agree that if other effective means offered themselves, they would
be preferable to making a law to prevent the abuse of freedom of worship.
We cannot have our very spirituality exploited for material gain by those who merely wish to control us for their own ends.

Religious regulation was posited as the state’s legitimate moral purview. Many, however, read this as a sign of government’s refusal to liberalize or recognize individual rights. The Christian Council of Ghana, comprising 14 prominent churches, protested that government had curtailed liberties promoting religious and ethnic discrimination. Contrary to the law’s intent, established churches refused to register whereas new churches were eager for official recognition. Established churches were themselves “concerned at the proliferation of sects whose doctrines they found questionable” (Nugent 1995:188). However, they were immediately galvanized against government regulation of religious activities. The resistance of orthodox churches to government regulation ironically helped new churches emerge in their midst.

By the mid-1990s, Charismatic churches were the most popular form of worship in Ghana (Hanson 2000:173). Older denominations developed Charismatic subgroups with lively forms of worship and young leadership to hold onto their members. And although Charismatism emerged through youth rebellion, its proponents increasingly relied on images of success to promote their message. This resonated with the entrepreneurial spirit as well as established West African “Big Man” leadership models linking accumulation and display of wealth to power (McCaskie 1995). New pastors adopted flamboyant personal styles demonstrating established ideas that displays of extreme wealth are part of the production of public power across West Africa. For example, Akan chiefs ceremonially display authority through the richness of their kente cloth and gold adornments. Popular religious and entertainment events involve wealthy patrons publicly giving money as a sign of power. Indeed, affluence requires giving money back to the community. And rumors and jealousy often arise if those who are seen as wealthy do not reinject resources into the economy.

In a society that values the aesthetics of public wealth, a generation of politically disenfranchised youth turned to spiritual realms for new manners of material production. Accra’s landscape changed as new churches sprung up ranging from small wooden shacks with modest signs to huge concrete and tile building in central locations, providing alternative networks of social support and moral community. Successful congregations established smaller branches throughout the country. For Ghanaians around the world, new churches established branches abroad, providing crucial structural and emotional connections to home.
ARTISTS INTO PASTORS

Democratic elections held in 1992 ushered in a new constitution in line with IMF-mandated liberalization. Radio, print, and television were privatized, leading to a rapid proliferation of entertainment and commercial media. Charismatics quickly capitalized on changing technology. The conversion of popular entertainers was crucial to popularizing new churches. The association between entertainers and Charismatism highlights concerns about fakery and the relationship between staged performance and spiritual anointing. Religious conversion of entertainers provides a fruitful staging ground for the production and contestation of real–fake spiritual value.

Government curfews in the early 1980s established to curb moral “indiscipline” also destroyed Accra’s vibrant nightlife. State taxes on foreign imports designed to protect local producers made prices on musical equipment prohibitively high, crippling Ghana’s entertainment industry.\(^{10}\) Cheap video production, mobile video screenings, and DJ equipment rendered live bands and traveling theater economically unviable. Because religious institutions were exempt from taxes on musical instruments, musicians who did not leave the country began playing in new churches eager to attract mass audiences. They used popular music and dance in worship and sponsored gospel-highlife bands and theater groups.\(^{11}\)

In 1988 Nana Ampedu, one of the country’s most popular highlife musicians, was “touched by the Holy Spirit” when seven prophets came to him saying he should give up his “profane” entertainment lifestyle and, instead, preach about salvation and sin.\(^ {12} \) Since the 1960s Ampedu has toured Ghana as leader of a popular highlife band/concert party theater group, entertainment forms that dominated mid-20th-century West Africa entertainment. Instead of his 1970s rhinestone-studded black jumpsuit in the style of Wilson Pickett, Ampedu began to wear conservative suits. He shifted from the debauchery of popular music to a “respectable” Christian public persona. Although drawing on similar styles of showmanship and music he began to preach and sing to congregations to follow the word of God and avoid sin. Ampedu’s critics felt his conversion was a calculated career shift for a notorious showman who wanted to make money by latching onto the rapid rise of charismatic Christianity. As the leader of a rival concert party group told me, “That guy has never had a religious experience in his life. He is just trying to take advantage like so many of these other so-called men of God.”

In 1999, Ampedu helped establish the first explicitly Christian radio station in Accra, 103.5 FM. Since the privatization of radio in the mid-1990s, Christian programming and gospel music had steadily increased in market-share. By 2001,
there were three Christian FM stations in Accra. By 2008 Christian radio and television were ubiquitous (De Witte 2005). Although new churches integrated older forms of worship and entertainment with new media, purportedly secular realms of entertainment became permeated with the spirit of Charismatic Christianity. By appropriating the stance of Charismatic leadership, previously profane entertainers gained new public salience. Conversely, they popularized Christian messages, giving churches a stylish sheen as centers for entertainment. But as we shall see, the specter of the fake both shadows and drives this transformation.

**USHERING IN THE MILLENNIUM**

On December 31, 1999, a majority of young urban Ghanaians ushered in the millennium by going to church, demonstrating the centrality of Neo-Pentecostal sensibilities to public life (Hanson 2000). Four friends from Ghana’s National Theater and I went to Pastor Mensa Otabil’s International Central Gospel Church (ICGC). Established in 1984, ICGC is one of the largest and most respected Charismatic churches in the region. Otabil quit school for financial reasons, founding ICGC at age 24. His church gained recognition when Otabil broadcast sermons on Accra’s first successful private radio station, Joy FM in 1995. He explains, “If Joy FM had not given me the opportunity, I would still have probably remained a ‘hidden voice’ restricted to a little church somewhere” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). At the same time, *The Living Word*’s success lent the commercial station an air of respectability in seeking private sponsorship. Later expanding to television, his broadcasts are often heard in roadside kiosks and markets throughout Accra (De Witte 2003). Recordings are sold on cassette, VHS, CD, and DVD. A taxi driver in New York, Kojo, explained to me in 2007 that even though he was a Presbyterian, he listened to Otabil’s old cassette sermons for inspiration and has friends send new sermons. “Otabil is humble,” he said, “not like some arrogant pastors. He is also not afraid to talk about the real problems we face.”

Christ Temple, ICGC’s 4,000-seat headquarters, is a point of pride for church members. It is a magnificent open cathedral near central Accra, built in the late 1990s as one of the largest venues in Ghana. Through congregational fund-raising, investment, and community organizing new churches have arisen as centers of urban life. We arrived at 9:30 p.m. that New Year’s Eve. Christ Temple was already full with several thousand people seated outside in folding chairs rapidly set up around three sides of the building. The massive congregation consisted mostly of young adults, well-dressed in Western-style suits and dresses or West African formal dress. Although expensive cars filled the parking lot, indicating
an elite presence, much of the congregation consisted of laborers, traders, and seamstresses. The service reflected basic Neo-Pentecostal liturgy: singing by gospel choir and live band, prayers by various clergy, thanksgiving, and individual prayer. Video cameramen conspicuously recorded the altar. State-of-the-art speakers and ten-foot video screens adorned the walls inside and were mounted outside the temple for the crowds in folding chairs. The spectacle of technology condensed and focused the services on the pastor’s bodily presence.

Live Charismatic services are multimedia spectacles, visions of Afro-modernity for aspiring Ghanaians (cf. De Witte 2003, 2005). Meyer argues that Pentecostalism calls for “a complete break with the past” and is opposed to the “Ghanaian State which aim[s] at a restoration of national pride” (1998:316). In practice, this dichotomy is blurred. Mission Christianity for the most part demonized African music, dance, and worship although it promoted local languages and culture to facilitate conversions. In 1932, Gold Coast Colony banned antiwitchcraft shrines fostering Pentecostal and African Independent Church’s popularity through their incorporation of witch-finding techniques and African modes of worship (Allman and Parker 2005). Most Neo-Pentecostals explicitly denounce African culture while their religious services formally incorporate popular entertainment and traditional worship. Otabil explicitly invokes culture for Africanizing modernity (cf. Meyer 2004b). According to one young member who is a bank clerk, she likes Otabil’s church because he is “more Ghanaian” than “Westernized” Charismatics. Appropriating national ceremonial imagery, the choir wears Ghanaian kente and wax-print cloth sewn in African styles. One member states, “Otabil always dresses like an African. He does not wear expensive suits.” He preaches in elegant lace agbadas or other African formal wear although, like most well-known pastors, Otabil preaches in English. He is noted for using simple language and humor deploying the modern authority conferred by English while appearing local and accessible.

As midnight approached, Otabil preached about past failures and future potential. The millennium, he said,

is a moment of transition, a time for reflection on your situation, personally and as a nation. . . . This is a chance to realize your dreams, to overcome frustrations of the past and lay the foundation for future prosperity. . . . Some of you want to succeed in business, others want to build a new house, some want to have children. Your future can be different than your past.

Individual faith was the key to change, turning spiritual development into material progress. He called audience members to refashion themselves in the
personalized language of an African-oriented liberation theology. Otabil often asked congregation members to speak affirmations emphasizing faith as choice. He commanded that everyone turn to the person seated on each side of him or her and say, “You are a beautiful person and you will have your miracle.” Emphasizing success through belief and self-confidence, he then asked people to repeat the phrase but this time to say, “You are a beautiful black person and will have your miracle.” For broader audiences, this performative enunciation aligned racial affiliation with individuated faith. Individual choice is encouraged through collectivity.

Just before midnight at Christ Temple, excitement peaked as Otabil told people to pray, “in their own individual ways,” for their future. As the clock counted down, murmured prayers in English, Ewe, Twi, Fante, Ga, and those praying in tongues, built to a polyphonic crescendo trailing off after the stroke of midnight. Abena, a young actress, explained that Otabil, despite his fame and large congregation, “makes you feel like he is speaking to you.”

In the video Turning Failure into Success, recorded live and sold at the chapel bookstore, Otabil uses metaphors of performance, invoking listeners as active participants in God’s plan.

Say with me in Jesus’s name, that in this year I will turn my failure into success. Because God is with me, nothing shall be against me. . . . Your life is being rewritten and the parts you play has been exchanged from the part of the drunkard to the part of the prince! [Cheering] The script has changed! you are not going to play the role of a failure again. You are not going to play the role of somebody who is down again. You are going to play a new role a role of a successful person in Jesus’s name. [Otabil 2000]

The key is the worshipper’s active choice:

Do you know that people fail by choice? You don’t fail by force. You are the number one contributor to your failure . . . you can’t help a person beyond his ability to change.

Otabil chastises those who passively wait for salvation. Success is not a gift but, rather, achieved through personal labor and active choice (Otabil 2001). The possibility of success is embodied by the pastor himself. Sermons authorize audience members to make moral choices that will lead to inner spiritual transformation and, in turn, material prosperity. Through shifting participation roles, sermons produce a tension between an agentive speaker and a structured collective. The pastor is both mediator, channeling the gift of the Holy Spirit, and an idealized individual
agent voicing and unleashing inner potential (Agha 2005). Shifting between first, second, and third person indexicals align pastor and congregation in past failure, present struggle, and future potential.

Humor frames the transformative dangers and potentials of speaking. In concluding one segment of *Turning Failure into Success*, Otabil preaches, “God is about to answer your prayers, even those of you who pray casually. So be careful what you say. Be careful what you pray for.” The potency of choice as well as its corrupting potential is at the heart of his message. Parodying the power of words Otabil points to spiritual struggle as an ongoing battle over meaning and agency. It is continual and messy rather than being an easy opposition of good and evil. Otabil calls on his listeners to actively choose success, creating a moral interiority that dictates the performance of public actions. The pastor weaves together overlapping voices that populate Accra’s urban chronotope, reimagining a hopeful future in contrast to a flawed past and corrupt present. Otabil’s mediatized pan-African Charismatism provides worshippers with a spiritual language to engage racial and economic inequality as anointed entrepreneurs. Although material success is a sign of spiritual power, the potential for fakery haunts its performative potential.

Pastor Kodjoe Amankwa’s sermon at a small branch of Christian Action Faith Ministries in suburban Accra, not long after the millennium, demonstrates how threat of fakery both haunts and mobilizes pastoral authority. Situated at one end of a dirt compound, the one-story concrete structure with corrugated roof holds about 150 worshippers. The congregation of local workers wears their Sunday best. The pastor is dressed in a tailored powder-blue suit, crisp white shirt, silk tie, and gold watch. He stands on a crowded pulpit amidst cluttered musical equipment, surrounded by church officials. A cordless microphone is clipped to his lapel and connected to large dusty speakers. He exudes personal confidence:

Many supposed men of God . . . present themselves as spiritually pure. They drive fancy cars and wear beautiful suits and get fat off of their poor congregations. People want to believe but then see these men drive off and leave them to walk and sweat on a dusty road. And you shake your head and say are you sure this is a man of God? . . . We are all of the same flesh . . . the Spirit is in you.

The threat of spiritual fakeness is a sign of failed moral and economic circulation. Charismatic preaching challenges the indirect speaking characteristic of Ghanaian public life, emphasizing immediacy, sincerity, and directness as metacodes for moral authority (cf. Yankah 1995). This is characterized by the repetitive
layering of active commands in the first and second person. Warnings about false prophets distance the speaker from rumors of impropriety, especially as congregational donations provide primary revenue for church and pastor. During services, gospel-highlife music plays as worshippers line up to dance or walk down the aisles, placing donations in large boxes near the pulpit. The pastor implores, “In the Lord’s name, what you give you shall receive back a thousand fold!” The ethos of giving and building the church confers the promise of moral right and future material success. Congregations also hold fundraisers for specific building projects and members make donations when they have achieved success or for deliverance and healing services. As one member explained, “You give especially when you have found success yourself.” Active material exchanges animate spiritual ones.

COMEDIANS PARODY PASTORS

At the National Theater of Ghana on December 26, 1999, the 1,500-seat theater was standing-room only for the fifth annual national finals of the Key Soap “Who Is Who” Concert Party competition to pick the best comedian and best concert party theater troupe. In the course of my research at the National Theater, I became friends with Ghana Boy, an up-and-coming comedian. He often relied on the growing affinity between pastoral preaching and comedic parody. Often comedians self-consciously invoke the genre of preaching and poke fun at audience expectations of salvation and deliverance. Comedians inhabit and critique the ambivalences of pastoral preaching, making themselves into legitimate social commentators.

Concert party is an eclectic popular theater form performed primarily in Akan languages combining Ananse storytelling with multiple Western and African genres from vaudeville to church cantatas (Cole 2001; Collins 1994). In the mid-20th century, groups would travel across Ghana playing to audiences in small towns and urban centers. Shows were all-night affairs intermingling music and comedy into an extended theatrical story. With the decline of Ghanaian nightlife the groups struggled, until in 1994 Key Soap (a Unilever Ghana, Ltd. brand) sponsored a revitalization performed at the National Theater for Ghana Television broadcast (Shipley 2004). Replacing its older raucous image for commodity sales, the show was formatted as a judged competition between popular artists with organizers policing the use of “proper morals and language.” With the transformation of the genre to television and formal stages, comedians focused on short stand-up routines separated out from longer dramas. They told a series of humorous moral vignettes,
creatively incorporating props, costume, dance, and music but focused on the solo performer.

Backstage at the competition, Ghana Boy put on his costume, a foam cutout map of Ghana, and applied red, yellow, and green face paint. A few minutes later the crowd cheered as he came to the microphone smiling. He flatly stated a connection between comedy and pastoral preaching. “I am a pastor, telling you stories for your salvation.” He told several humorous stories with serious moral messages: about three naive Ghanaians who travel abroad and get arrested for a murder they did not commit, and about a young man who smokes marijuana and is burned to death because he is too stoned to realize his house is on fire. As Ghana Boy’s 20-minute routine concluded, the crowd laughed and cheered as he rode off on a hand-cranked paraplegic’s bicycle.

Next came the contestant everyone was waiting for: Bishop Bob Okalla, Ghana Boy’s mentor and the favorite to win the competition. His name reflected the comedian’s irreverence and mimicry. As he was announced, he slipped into the auditorium by a side door and the crowd erupted at his unexpected appearance. Okalla wore a ragged colonial police uniform stuffed with a pillow and tied with a giant wristwatch around his stomach. He had a cooking pestle for a necktie, along with two dirty neckties loosely hanging around his collar. Snow boots adorned his feet and his hands were covered with long red stockings. On his left wrist was strapped a wall clock. He wore messy white face paint, oversized glasses, and a police inspector’s cap. Okalla casually walked through the audience to the stage, as a “small boy” carried his arm and the oversized clock attached to it as if he were carrying a heavy load for his master. His character was a pastiche of symbols, simultaneously evoking multiple registers: colonial, domestic, state, storytelling trickery. The oversaturated markers of the mundane created a character both naively embedded within daily life, and pushed to the extreme through an excessive display of the normal. In emphasizing the absurdity of daily life, he called attention to the impossibility of normalcy for struggling Ghanaians.

Mounting the stage, Okalla performed his signature awkward dance and face contortions to resounding cheers. With comic seriousness, his left arm strapped with the clock held stiffly away from his body, he greeted the audience as if he were an old woman welcoming them home from a long journey. He asked if they had had anything to eat. As the crowd shouted “no, we are hungry!” he shifted registers, adopting a pastor’s authoritative speaking stance (Goffman 1981). He told the crowd with mock seriousness that he knew Sunday everyone went to church and
prayed hard so that the rumored millennium comet would not destroy the country. (One manifestation of millennium anxiety was in humorous rumors circulating around Accra about a millennium comet coming to destroy the country.) For some, a foreign body hurtling through space toward the small country symbolized frustration at the nation’s economic instability. As one audience member later told me, “We Ghanaians lack control over our predicament. Like this silly comet rumor, we can be crushed at any time.”

Okalla mused that he did not want people to get hurt, so he went up to the sky and fetched the comet. He began to sing the tune of a popular local rap song, calling the rock to come down. An audience member shouted “In the name of Jesus!” as the crowd howled with laughter. Descending from the ceiling was a papier-mâché comet with an old-fashioned pocket-watch. It hovered behind Okalla amidst Key Soap advertising that decorated the set. Audience members recognized themselves in the performer’s invocation of the framing devices of church services, shouting “Hallelujah!” and “Amen!” and waving handkerchiefs, parodically adopting the stances of a church congregation, if only for a moment. They were remade in the performative force of comedian as Charismatic preacher, just as they adopted the bodily affects of a hip-hop audience in response to the performer’s use of this popular music. A comic’s skill is to rapidly interweave a diverse set of speech genres, to realign and push to excess various types of singing, preaching, and storytelling.

Bishop Bob Okalla’s command of the millennium comet directly invoked pastoral preaching by mimicking the claims pastors make about the power of words to reshape Ghanaians’ material circumstances. In contradistinction to the weight of spiritual and economic problems, the trickster’s solution was absurdly direct. Using the power of words, he called down the unseen danger of the comet for all to scrutinize. A fantastical millennial rumor was rendered visible and absurd through its literal enactment. As the rock hovered behind him on-stage through the rest of his monologue, the colonial-style watch ominously invoked both nostalgia and foreignness. Although Pastor Otabil’s preaching oriented subjects toward a new future, Okalla’s comedy emphasized symbols of time and the past, framing the future through the layered, unspoken presence of the past in daily life. Structuring his comedic routine through formal aspects of Charismatic preaching allowed Okalla to inhabit and comment on the struggles and hopes of material life in the metalanguage of performance.

Bishop Bob Okalla won the competition: three million Cedis and a trip to Toronto to perform at Anansekrom a festival for the Canadian Ghanaian community.14 Ghana Boy came in second place. At the beginning of a promising theatrical
career, he realized the dream of many Ghanaians by traveling to the United States.

Comedians are legitimate fakes. Comedians and pastors both draw on the tradition of Ananse the trickster in telling moral stories. As noted earlier, trickster storytelling relies on slippage between notions of trickery and talking. Comedians mimic and explode pastors’ claims about the power of words by focusing on the pleasure of storytelling and trickery itself. Although a pastor is judged by the sincerity of his spiritual connection, a comedian is judged on the authenticity of his mimicry and how masterfully he juxtaposes and condenses different forms of public discourse. They both link daily life to moral lessons for public scrutiny within a multimedia aesthetic. The pastor represents an idealized neoliberal subject who is liberated to make individual moral choices. The comic is the perversion of this ideal, demonstrating the performance skills of a pastor while explicitly eschewing the claims to moral right. They stage comedic routines as moral lessons that explode the idea that words can be transformative, although in the process highlight and recontextualize words and actions for further public scrutiny. The comic points to critical agency embodied in the ideal of parody itself. Comedians mock pastoral authority by inhabiting, condensing, and amplifying rhetorical and bodily styles. But in parody they validate the language of individual aspiration as central to public moral deliberation.

MEDIATING SCANDAL

The threat of charlatans haunts public discourse; some fear being tricked whereas others fear being accused of trickery. The prevalence of these figurations reveals the fake at the symbolic center of moral deliberation. Scandalous, shocking tales are common. Stories about fake pastors and their sexual and material corruption infuse radio, television, video-films, newspapers, and Internet. Public talk is often mediated through texting and radio call-in programs dominated by mobile phone users. Tales of trickery have a broader life than each specific controversy, suffusing media and daily talk. Audiences try to discern whether a story’s subject intends to deceive or is animating the word of God. Threats of moral trickery create spaces for public deliberation over hopes for spiritual and material wealth, and fears of failure (Beidelman 1980).

Electronica confer the sheen of modernity. Technological forms speed up and multiply how rumors of fakeness circulate. Less reputable newspapers displayed at wooden kiosks along roadsides often have prominent photos and large headlines. As one newspaper worker explained to me, “These stories sell papers. People
love to hear these controversies.” These tales are not simply pulp entertainment but, instead, permeate state-sponsored and private media. The same stories move among media from newsprint to radio to internet, linking dispersed audiences around moral titillation. For example in 2003 national press reported the chief administrator of a major Kumasi state hospital,

warned the public against the tricks of some fake pastors who make unnecessary claims to outwit them . . . he described such pastors as tricksters and warned radio stations to screen pastors who, in radio broadcasts, make . . . misleading claims at the peril of the lives of the members of the public.15

On radio, Rev. Ebenezer Adarkwa Yiadom, founder of Ebenezer Worship Center, claimed that a woman came to him complaining of stomach pain after having surgery at the hospital. He prayed for her and a surgical knife “fell from the woman’s private part.” The medical administrator described the pastor as a liar who was only exposing his ignorance of the anatomy of the human body. He advised people seeking “counseling in life to go to good pastors . . . like Mensa Otabil.” Ebenezer’s actions are judged false; the pastor is cast as a trickster taking advantage of public suffering and naïveté. But as the saying goes, there is no such thing as bad press. Rather than destroy his legitimacy, controversies of this sort appear productive of Ebenezer’s spiritual potential. Indeed, as I describe later, Ebenezer Worship Center grew to include major revival meetings and a television show despite various accusations.

Pastoral controversy is a common trope linking common concerns about sexuality, money, and family to the dangers and potencies of the spiritual realm. Moral shock provides a space for engaging with day-to-day moral ambivalences. Tales have stock characters emplaced within narratives of struggle, outrageous degradation, and potential redemption. A newspaper story entitled “All Night Prayer Service in Hotel Room: Married Woman in Big Trouble” describes a woman attending a new church, The Come to Jesus Ministry.16 Soon afterward, she stopped sleeping with her husband. He “found out that his wife’s spate of all-night [prayer session] outings were false and that she had been secretly meeting the pastor of her church in a hotel.” The pastor told her that he “had prophesied that she would die . . . if she continued living” with her husband. The pastor had “a vision” that the husband was “a wizard . . . possessed with 65 demons and has been communing with evil spirits each night.” The pastor told the man to find another wife as “the marriage . . . had been spiritually annulled.” In another newspaper story, “Pastor Runs Away from Pregnancy,” a pastor claims “to have seen God in a
vision asking him to marry a woman.”17 The woman consequently moved in with him. But as soon she became pregnant, the pastor accused her of “being a witch who wanted to break his relationship with God.” The woman’s family took him to court for violating the marriage.

These stories link Ghanaians at home and abroad through a contested sense of moral community. Another recent article in the *Daily Guide* (reprinted online at www.ghanaweb.com) describes a 13-year-old girl told by her mother to visit a pastor for prayers and to receive an anointed handkerchief. The pastor was accused of having sex with the girl. The mother alerted the authorities, not initially because of sexual impropriety but, rather, because the pastor had shaved the girl’s pubic hair and the mother feared he would spiritually harm the daughter. Within a day of being posted on the popular Ghanaian news Web site, 300 responses were posted from Ghanaians in the country and around the globe. This story provoked passionate discussion ranging from state political corruption to the history of the misconduct of white devil colonial missionaries who had acted in similar ways toward Africans. Many responses lament the ubiquity of spiritual fakes. Several argue that Christian worshippers should take a lesson from Islam and read the Bible personally and more with personal discipline. One said, “Brothers & SISTERS, PLEASE OPEN YOUR EYES AND READ THE BIBLE YOURSELF. I can tell you that if any of this pastors [sic] comes to you and realize that you know the word then they get choke with their tricks.”18 Here is an argument against needing pastors to mediate God’s word. Unmediated personal knowledge of God can circumvent the trickery of opportunistic preachers. In this logic, pastors insidiously make themselves appear necessary as spirit mediums for a generation freed from the hierarchies of older churches. The online posting continues. “Being a pastor is a call from God . . . [and] is not about money.” In conversation with Bronx-based Ghanaians about this case, one young man criticized linking material wealth and spirituality. “You case your body in gold and diamonds. But what does God need with diamonds? It is what is in your heart that matters. That is what concerns God.”

Spiritual trickery, although condemned morally, becomes a form of social mobility animated in electronic circulation. Stories of impropriety glamorize material temptations for a male sexually consuming entrepreneurial subject. Newspaper, Internet, and radio replicate and circulate stories for Ghanaians to question and assess, creating a discursive space of moral deliberation. The saturation of electronic and print news with sexual and financial fakes blur lines between desire and threat. Indeed, desire often emerges for that which is morally repugnant. Moral subjects are produced and contested through ambiguity of mediatized talk that links
spiritual power to material success, spiritual trickery to entrepreneurialism. Moral ambivalence to pastoral authority and obsessions with discerning real from fake is itself an engine of public circulation. A poetics of public life relies on linking the two.

Radio call-ins resonate with these circulating stories as public moral deliberation. By the late 1990s, radio call-in programs were a staple of daily life with stations competing for audiences with both the promise of spiritual deliverance and titillating topical discussions. New electronic media are well suited to address moral anxieties about the misuse of the Holy Spirit’s power. The speed and repetition of electronic circulation magnifies the effect of moral stories. The formal aspects of radio call-in programs coupled with the ubiquity of mobile phones create a dispersed moral community of participant-listeners. This community centers on the public circulation of the idealized figure of the pastor and his model of aspiration and success. Tales of spiritual disaster provide a frame for understanding personal predicaments. The radio call-in format confers authority through technology’s association with modernity’s power. But the medium also lends itself to manipulation and trickery.

One example is Pastor Kwesi Bonsu, who had a call-in program in Accra for several months. He claimed that the Holy Spirit gave him the power to heal ailments. People called and he healed their physical maladies over the phone. The program became a popular talking point around Accra. During one program a man called to be healed and the pastor prayed for him several times but the man said he was not getting better. It was discovered that the pastor had been paying people to call and pretend to be healed. The program was quickly taken off the air. I had heard this program during theater rehearsals with several popular groups in Accra. While discussing the debunking of this fake healer, one young actor jokingly placed his hands on a female friend’s shoulders and went into a mock trance, speaking in tongues. Shaking violently, he shouted, “In the name of Jesus give me money! Amen.” Everyone laughed. Another, more pious actor was upset at the mockery of prayer even though he agreed it replicated what had happened. He lamented quietly, “You see what people will do for money.” Spiritual fakery—and the replicating parodies surrounding it—produces a space for debating and contesting ideologies of individual choice and deliberating on moral right.

The most significant radio call-in show in the first decade of private radio has been Odo Ne Asomdwee [Love and Peace]. It has been a platform for unmasking rampant fake pastors and other public scams. Grace Omaboe, a nationally renowned
television and film actress, is popularly known as Maame Dokonoe, the comic name of the market woman she portrayed in the weekly soap opera Ofoso Dadze [Pastor Dadze]. In 1997 she began hosting her call-in show on Choice FM in Accra, focusing on solving problems for people whom neither family nor local authorities would help. The program is conducted entirely in Akan and Ga, targeting popular audiences. For Maame Dokonoe and her audiences, the program provides a dispersed moral community. Whereas many programs last for a short time, Maame Dokonoe has been on air continuously for over a decade and expanded the show to broadcast on Metro TV. As one listener explained, “She tells the truth, not like politicians or these fake religious leaders you can find everywhere.”

During her show’s broadcast a large portion of shops, roadside markets, taxi ranks, public transportation vehicles, and work sites around the city were tuned in to listen to Maame Dokonoe. Outside of Choice FM’s studios, hundreds of people with a variety of problems often congregated, waiting to speak with Maame Dokonoe. For each program she picks several cases to investigate and bring onto the show. “The purpose of the program is to compensate the victims of spiritual and financial scams . . . and bring these false pastors and such people to public justice.” Without legal authority she relies on the power of talk as public shaming. This draws on older oral traditions where rumor becomes a form of community moral discipline through shaming (Yankah 1995). During the program, the hostess interviews various parties involved and broadcasts live phone calls for listeners to present their opinion on the case. Surprisingly, those accused of sexual misconduct or financial impropriety often come on air to defend themselves and try to save face. Reflecting the shows public importance, a common joke in Accra was to tell someone that “if you cheat me, I will take you to Maame Dokonoe.” This in fact replicates an older saying that shows the power of oral circulation as social discipline, “If you fool me, everyone will know what you have said.” Moral community is posited in the judgment of sincerity and consistency of language use. There is an expectation that the value of words will emerge in the process of their circulation.

Those accused of trickery often defend taking money for uncompleted spiritual acts by arguing that they are only a medium for powerful spirits they cannot control or that the ritual conditions were not met. Victims demystify secret rituals and prayer sessions by revealing them in titillating detail. Maame Dokonoe responds in the language of business exchange pushing guests to admit they do not have spiritual powers or that they have failed to fulfill their promises. For many the exchange of money for spiritual favors is not the question. In Christian, Islamic, and traditional
religions, congregations support religious leaders and institutions. Those who seek special attention for a funeral, wedding, or mediumship make donations. Piousness and spiritual sincerity are judged retroactively through successful exchanges of material for spiritual power.

The transformation of an actress into a radio call-in host seeking to unmask spiritual fakes shows the interpenetration of popular entertainment and Charisma-tism. Maame Dokonoe’s acting fame magnifies her sense of pious duty and her authority to assess fakery. In an increasingly Charismatic public sphere, threats of spiritual fakeness and corruption provide a moral language through which legitimate public behavior is assessed. Moral authenticity is measured in the language of public performance. The struggles to discern real and fake spiritual power creates a deliberative space and a language for talking about the threat and promise of individuated desires. Maame Dokonoe’s program has contributed to public discourse delineated by ubiquitous electronically circulating talk about corrupt preachers. The desperate hope for divine healing is haunted by fake pastors’ duplicitous fluency in the language of spiritual power. The more someone is in need, the greater the anxiety at being led astray, or taken advantage of sexually or financially.

GHANA BOY SEEKS SPIRITUAL HELP

In 2007 Ghana Boy, the popular comedian discussed earlier, went blind. “First I lost sight in one eye and then the other one started to go. September 5, 2007 was the last day that I saw anything.” When he lost his vision he was forced to return to his family’s house in Kumasi. A group of friends and artists from Accra came to visit him at his mother’s house in Kumasi after hearing rumors of his plight. We sat under a tree in the mud-block compound house tucked between an Evangelical Pentecostal Church and a garbage dump on the outskirts of the city.

He had traveled to the United States for a series of theater performances and had overstayed his visa. He worked as a security guard in the Bronx and later passed out fliers in Times Square. He hoped to earn money to help his entertainment career. But when he returned to Ghana he had no money. There were, of course, high expectations from family and friends that he would support them after traveling abroad. He was frustrated because he did not have the financial means to produce the films and albums he had in progress. “I won’t lie to you: Things have been hard. But, by God’s grace everything will be ok.”

When he started to go blind he went to Korle Bu, Accra’s main hospital, but they did not find any physical causes for his lost vision. “When they told me that they did not see any problem with my eyes, I went to see my mother. I never told
you this, Jesse, but she is a fetish, an Okomfo. She is at a powerful shrine in my hometown in Brong Ahafo region. When I went there the shrine told me that the gods and ancestors were angry because I had traveled and had not come to them to pay my respects properly . . . you know when you go abroad people get jealous so it could also be that people are using witchcraft to bring me down.” Spiritual attacks are usually understood to be committed by those closest to the victim. Those who are successful are subject to spiritual attack by friends and family who feel neglected and entitled to share in their kin’s success. Many who seek supernatural protection do so out of anxiety that they have already been attacked by unknown assailants close to them. After returning to Kumasi, Ghana Boy was confined to a small cement block room he shared with ten male relatives. During the day he was mostly alone with only his mobile phone and radio for companionship. He showed us how he saved numbers on his Nokia phone by memorizing and counting how many buttons to push.

Ghana Boy explained that he called several radio pastors. He finally got in touch with one of most popular, Reverend Doctor Ebenezer Opambour Adarkwa Yiadom, whom I described earlier. Ghana Boy explained that he went to Ebenezer Miracle Worship Centre, where Ebenezer preinterviewed him before the service, asking details about losing his vision. Ghana Boy told him that he had traveled abroad, lost his passport on returning to Ghana, and soon after lost his vision.

Ebenezer is young, handsome, well dressed. His church attracts young, active audiences and is broadcast on radio and television across the country. At his most animated, his performance emphasizes forceful intonation, convoluted facial expressions, tense trance-like bodily movements that accentuate that he is struggling to channel forces from another realm. The television show uses dramatic editing to emphasize Ebenezer’s miraculous powers of healing. It is at its most dramatic when Ebenezer gestures toward the crowd with prayers and the camera pans across the audience as they collapse in waves as if directly hit by the spiritual force of his words and gestures. The camera movements imagine power flowing from his body into the audience. Sitting in the congregation of the megachurch, Ghana Boy was called on stage during the healing section of the service. “He acted like we had not met. He started asking me have I recently traveled and I replied “yes.” The crowd shouted with excitement. “Heeey!” He then asked if I lost my passport and I said yes. The crowd screamed. Then he prayed intensely and said that someone was attacking my eyes but that I would be better in four weeks. Everyone shouted with joy and praised the Lord. I went to sit down again . . . that was three months ago.”
As we contemplated his plight, Ghana Boy mused on the techniques pastors use to appear spiritually powerful. He joked about a man with a high-pitched voice who called in to a radio pastor who healed people over the radio. “Most of the women calling claim to have problems giving birth, you see. But this pastor was not clever enough when he received a call. ‘Hello?’” Ghana Boy says in an exaggerated falsetto voice. “Don’t say anything else, ma’am. I can see that you have a problem with your womb,” Ghana Boy says, shifting into the smooth authoritative voice of a radio preacher. He pauses for comic effect. Again in an exaggerated high voice he intones, “Please, Pastor, I am a man, ooh!” His small audience laughs as Ghana Boy shakes his head, telling jokes he has performed for large crowds.

After Ebenezer’s failure Ghana Boy explained, “I am covering all my bases.” He was going to finish the traditional shrine rituals in his home village to “appease the gods.” He is also seeing medical doctors a Kumasi’s Akomfe Anokye Teaching Hospital in case they can find something physically wrong with him. And he hoped to find a pastor to really heal him. His friend Serwaa Koto sells tea and bread in Adom, a central shopping area of Kumasi, and comes after work to help him. She is a religious Christian but is upset that he has spent so much money going to see pastors who have cheated him. Another friend, an actress, confided her concern that Ghana Boy had given money he needed for food and shelter to men claiming they could heal him through spiritual means. Sitting in his room, Serwaa Koto says the only one option left is to make his case public. “We should take it to Maame Dokonoe. What else can we do? You have been to the doctors and to several pastors who claim they will help but all they do is take your money.”

As Ghana Boy’s story circulated it picked up speed, intertwined with other tales of spiritual malfeasance. In August 2008, someone in the Concert Party Theatre Union, of which Ghana Boy was a member, was accused of sending the photograph of the wife of recently deceased comedian Bob Santos to a fetish priest to have her killed “out of jealousy around his success,” as another member says. She was interviewed on Hot FM in Accra, broadcast by its affiliate Fox FM in Kumasi, where Ghana Boy heard the program. She mentioned Ghana Boy’s lost vision as an example of the kinds of spiritual attacks that are made out of jealousy. She discussed how artists and Ghanaians more generally “bring each other down” using spiritual means. The radio DJ called Ghana Boy to talk about his case on air. He described how spiritual attacks are commonly used to prevent fellow Ghanaians from succeeding. “Out of jealousy we hold ourselves back.”

This common discourse of national lament connects the spiritual realm to material gain by positing the collectivity as opposed to individual aspiration. Witchcraft
accusations and rumor circulation in Ghanaian societies are old disciplinary forms for punishing individuals who put personal interests ahead of the national, ethnic, village, or family collective (Field 1962). Aspiration takes many forms. Foreign travel produces value in the imagination of those left at home. Entertainers are self-fashioning public figures, making them susceptible to scrutiny. Because of these two factors Ghana Boy felt especially vulnerable to spiritual attack. He traced his physical ailment to a neglect of traditional spiritual forces and the perception that he had not looked after collective needs in favor of his aspirations. “When people think you make money and you don’t donate to your church or to the shrine they think you are holding out on them. They will punish you. But my problem is I never made any money, but they did not believe me. What was I to do?” In seeking to counteract these forces, Ghana Boy was again victimized by pastors who preyed on his neediness.

In September 2008 Ghana Boy was interviewed live on 104.5 FM’s regular evening program. He related to me, “The host challenged the public, calling anyone who can help me get my sight back. Since the interview my phone has not rested. We have selected and interviewed two or three people who by God’s grace will help me.” Ghana Boy’s continued hope and public search for miraculous solutions is played out through his mobile phone. Despite recognition that he has been tricked by spiritual frauds, he seeks those who are morally good and spiritually giving.

Ghana Boy’s tragic story shows how aspiration and failure are refracted in spiritual terms. And loss can be replicated, performed, and made productive. By January 2009 he was acting again, indeed portraying a false prophet in a video-film. I called Ghana Boy and we talked while he was shooting. “My character is very funny. I give counseling to people. When they come and say ‘I need a husband. I want to travel,’ I lie to them. I tell them I will pray. I will use special oils and then I take their money. The film is Onyame Ahu Wo, ‘God sees you.’ And the cameraman is shooting it so that you cannot tell that I am blind.”

**CONCLUSION: COUNTERFEIT MORALITY**

Recent scholarship on political and popular culture tends to conflate diverse forms of liberal subjectivity as either made by states in their institutional capacities or emerging from the transactions of civil society. Religious and popular genres neither oppose nor replace states but, rather, interlace various technological and institutional realms, aligning authority and entertainment, pleasure and divinity. In examining Ghanaian video-films, Meyer (1998:321) argues that the devil is central to Pentecostal public culture in its dichotomous negotiation of tradition
and modernity. Although diabolic figures are prevalent in popular iconography, to take negative morality as emblematic of a public sphere does not explain how social actors practically negotiate power across lived worlds. Nor does it examine the performative work of moral assessment as social practice. Good and evil are not separate realms in spiritual battle but, instead, two sides of the public enactment of authority. Fakes are productive, not only of pastoral authority but also of sustained moral discourse built on older popular genres. The threat of the fake is generative in structuring this deliberative discourse cultivated across performance genres.

Public obsession with the fake becomes a form of moral discipline that produces what it claims to mitigate against. The pastor is an idealized entrepreneurial subject creating a market and audience in performance. Participants become agentive by reflexively choosing the ideology of choice itself. Marketization presents new agencies as well as new uncertainties. Publics struggle to maintain clear moral dichotomies that threaten to collapse in the affinity between individual choice and personal greed. Entertainers often inhabit this shifting terrain between moral clarity and collective anxiety.

Local understandings of performance are rooted in assessments of actors’ moral dispositions. Audiences and congregations strain to discern the spiritual legitimacy of converts and pastors claiming authority through the Holy Spirit. The threat of the fake’s inversion of value conveys the hopes and dangers of individual choice. Electronic media accelerate pastoral influence as well as anxiety about fakeness. Moral assessment of performance blurs the lines between entertainment and worship, political-economic concerns and spiritual struggle. Theater artists mix religious and entertainment genres permeating public life with Charismatic moral sensibilities.

Aspiration in the mid-20th-century Gold Coast Colony was for political autonomy and access to the promises of modernity. Workers strove for wage labor and the institutions of the state formerly denied to African peoples. In the new millennium, the failures of postcolonial centralized states, and the shift from wage labor to imaginaries of prosperity through divinity and marketization point to new mystifications of progress. Personal aspiration becomes a divine mirror of the mediatized, sped-up landscape. The idea of choice itself is a fetish for freedom, structured as moral ideal for the individual and immoral nightmare for the collective. Neoliberalism structures individual freedom as desirable but increasingly out of reach (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). The ubiquity and speed of electronica—radio, Internet, mobile phones—and the overlapping realms of religion, entertainment, news, and politics blend into an overlapping mediatized
spectacle (Debord 1994:16). Sermons circulate on radio, television, and digital forms. Private anxieties are made public in mobile phone calls to radio stations that are then streamed online for Ghanaians abroad. Secret rituals are described for mass newspaper and radio audiences. Business, pleasure, and spirituality merge through the language of lament and moral anxiety. The fake becomes a ubiquitous part of the daily circulations of media and talk, creating an inverted image of public Christian morality.

Debates about fakeness recall concerns with witchcraft accusations unleashed in the modern colonial state in 1930s West Africa. There is a similar logic of inversion and anxiety in which spiritual forces are used in defense against others thought to already be on the spiritual attack. Max Gluckman’s reading of E. E. Evans-Pritchard shows the logic of sorcery and witchcraft is retroactive in that misfortune is subsequently explained by attributing malevolence to individuals who—intentionally with sorcery and unintentionally with witchcraft—produce destructive action (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1931). Gluckman (1965:220) argues that witchcraft is both a “theory of morality” and of causality. In Charismatic discourse, prosperity defines moral legitimacy and a retroactive logic frames success as positive and failure as negative.

The language of moral action allows people to both inhabit and critique individuated aspirations and personal consumptive practices. Counterfeit moral and economic value is often tied to modernity’s aspirations; fakes and fetishes mobilize spirituality in imagining moral and immoral agencies (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006:13–16). As Andre Gide (1949) explores through counterfeit currency, neither real nor fake have ultimate referents but gain legitimacy through practices of circulation. But the threat of the counterfeiter also breeds anxiety about the origins of value, unleashing a crisis of authority. As postcolonial Africa is reshaped by neoliberal concerns, national publics become moral landscapes of individual potential and threat. In Nigeria the confluence of fabulous oil wealth and authoritarian military rule produced what Andrew Apter (1999) has called a “simulacra state” that supported fantastical schemes for wealth production. The disjuncture between the public display of wealth and structural modes of production helped 419 scams and various forms of economic trickery become almost-acceptable forms of wealth creation (Apter 1999). As with electronically mediated Charismatism, these forms rely on circulation itself to produce legitimacy.

Neoliberalism produces suspicion that things are not as they appear. The specter of the fake pastor manifests fear of a bad transaction, of uneven exchange. Prevalent accusations of fakery reveal a disconnect between ideals of
entrepreneurship and the lived experience of an economy reliant on service industries, travel, and consumption as productive engines. Having faith is an agentive moral stance—a belief in the performative potential of public life—that sets conditions for the miraculous to occur. Moral anxieties about spiritual attacks and fakery are animated by the performative doubleness associated with this postcolonial version of neoliberalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). In neoliberal Africa, the renewable morality of hope belies promises of economic success and threats of failure.

**ABSTRACT**

This essay traces Charismatic preaching and the moral importance of the fake pastor across public spaces and genres in Accra, Ghana. I argue that fear of the fake pastor creates a local theory of moral performance that sets the conditions of possibility for the legitimacy of the pastor as a public figure. Although rapid circulation generates anxiety about spiritual sincerity, it also produces continual hope for the miraculous and the potential for morally legitimate agency. The specter of the fake pastor provides a symbolic nexus for the transformation of spiritual into economic value in privatizing Ghana. This transformation occurs in the language of public moral belonging. A pastor’s moral authority relies on public style and performance to connect spiritual power, moral sincerity, and economic potency. Fakery appears as the margin, the horizon against which a moral center is clarified. The fake’s centrality to public moral discourse is rooted in the possibilities and dangers of individuated agencies associated with Ghana’s liberalization.

**Keywords:** Ghana, Christianity, performance, media, electronic circulation, morality, neoliberalism

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2. David Donkor, private correspondence November 2002. See also Sutherland 1975:5.
8. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
9. The proportion of the country claiming Christian as their religion remained fairly static at almost 70 percent in the 2000 census.


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