The Power of Money: Politics, Occult Forces, and Pentecostalism in Ghana
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Abstract: In the wake of the last democratic elections in Ghana, which took place in December 1996, the electoral commission published and distributed a poster that depicted a voter who was approached by both the Devil and an angel. While the former told the man to sell his vote for money, the latter made it clear that his vote was his voice, thereby insinuating that selling his vote would boil down to selling himself to the “powers of darkness.” The paper seeks to explain how Christianity, especially the pentecostal variant highly popular in southern Ghana, came to cast political discourse in religious terms. On the basis of the examination of a popular Ghanaian movie about a chief who indulges in ritual murder in order to generate wealth and power, it is shown that in Ghana a public debate is going on about the (im)morality of power. In this debate, rumors about the occult sources of power and wealth form the flip side of politicians’ claims of being linked with the divine. In distinction to established mission churches, pentecostalism takes such rumors about the threat of sorcery as seriously as the aim to turn Ghana into a Christian country. Presenting themselves as the sole members of society able to contain sorcery, pentecostalists claim to have the power to reveal the occult sources of those in power and subsequently to purify politics and politicians from occult traces and draw them closer to God.

Résumé: Pendant les dernières élections démocratiques au Ghana en décembre 1996, la commission électorale publia et distribua un poster avec l’image d’un électeur abordé à la fois par le Diable et par un ange. Alors que le diable disait à l’homme de vendre son vote, l’ange lui disait clairement que son vote était sa voix, suggérant ainsi que vendre son vote équivaudrait à se vendre aux “forces du mal”. Nos visons ici, à expliquer comment le Christianisme, notamment dans sa version pentecostale très populaire au sud du Ghana, est en venu à exprimer le discours

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politique en termes religieux. Partant de l’exemple d’un film sur un chef qui s’adonne au meurtre rituel afin de produire richesse et pouvoir, nous montrons qu’au Ghana il y a un débat sur l’(im)moralité du pouvoir. Dans ce débat, des rumeurs sur les origines occultes du pouvoir et de la richesse constituent le revers de la médaille des déclarations de politiciens qui disent être liés au divin. Ce qui la distingue des autres églises établies, c’est que l’Église pentecostale prend ces menaces de sorcellerie aussi sérieusement que son propre désir de transformer le Ghana en un pays chrétien. En se présentant comme la seule institution sociale en mesure de contrôler la sorcellerie, les adeptes du pentecostalisme déclarent qu’ils ont le pouvoir de révéler les sources occultes de ceux qui sont au pouvoir pour purifier la politique et les politiciens de l’occulte et les rapprocher de Dieu.

During the recent democratic elections in Ghana, which took place in December 1996, the electoral commission published and distributed a poster that was titled “Protect your vote!”1 It depicted a man who was approached by the Devil to his right side and an angel to his left. While the former suggested that the man sell his vote for money, the latter made it clear that his vote was his voice, thereby insinuating that selling his vote would mean selling himself to the “powers of darkness.”2 When I first saw this poster, I was struck by the fact that political discourse made use of Christian imagery, while the relationship between the (P)NDC government and the Christian churches has always been quite strained and while many Christians themselves were still involved in a debate as to whether or how they were to engage in national politics at all.3 The fact that the electoral commission chose to associate proper voting behavior with a Christian image testifies to the fact that Christianity, especially its pentecostal-charismatic variant, is highly popular in Southern Ghana (cf. Meyer 1995, 1998a, 1999b). The commission certainly realized that adopting Christian discourse would give credibility to the language of democracy and suggest that the moral standards of national politics depended on whether people cast their votes according to their personal moral conviction.

If the blending of the Christian dualism of God and the Devil and democratic elections may appear surprising, the entanglement of supernatural forces and politics in a more general sense has been a recurring feature in Ghanaian national politics. It can, in fact, be traced back to Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, and the governments that followed after him. Especially General Acheampong, head of state for six years after a military coup in 1972, is well known for having cast politics in religious language. Not only did he consult religious specialists of various backgrounds (Christian, Muslim, “traditional”) for the purpose of staying in power, but he also placed a ban on the Black Star—the symbol of Ghana’s independenc—because he considered it to be an occultist sign. In
addition, he organized events such as a Week of National Repentance (in 1977) and claimed that the political and economic problems of Ghana were caused by the sinfulness of the nation (cf. Pobee 1992: 6). The current president, Jerry J. Rawlings, who seized power on 31 December 1981 and was confirmed in his office through multiparty elections in 1992 and 1996, also speaks about politics in religious language. Especially in the beginning of his presidency, popular papers depicted him as a “Ghanaian Jesus” or, following from his initials, “Junior Jesus” who had “saved” or “cleansed” the nation through a “holy war” against corruption—images he readily appropriated when talking about his political achievements. In a recent television interview on a Dutch channel (Ned. 1, 30 September 1997, 22.39) he asserted that in the aftermath of the coup the execution of three former heads of state and five other high-ranking military leaders was an act of “exorcism” through which the Ghanaian nation was “delivered” and “cleansed.”

Yet I often heard people contest this divinized image of Rawlings, and, as is the case with many heads of state in Africa and elsewhere, there have been rumors about his involvement with occult powers. During my stay in Ghana in 1996 stories circulated asserting that Rawlings was protected by strong Ewe dzô (magic), that he had a secret room in the Castle (the seat of the president), and that the source of his power was human blood. Moreover, according to popular sources he is said to have swallowed a frog at a shrine in the Volta Region in order to fortify himself—a rumor that became even more widespread when Vice President Arkaah accused Rawlings in public of having done so and was slapped by Rawlings in return (Akyeampong 1996: 163). Similar rumors have circulated about other Ghanaian politicians—Nkrumah was also said to have a secret room, to rely on a priestess, and to carry a magical handkerchief. In attributing the power of modern politicians to occult sources, such ideas connect these politicians to “traditional” chiefs who derive their power from the “black stools” that were sanctified in precolonial times by human blood (usually of slaves)—a practice the British colonial administration banned as “barbaric” and incompatible with “civilization” and about which present-day Ghanaians have mixed feelings of pride and shame (Gilbert 1995). As the representatives of modern political leadership take up traditional images—without, however, drawing clear-cut analogies—supernatural forces and politics are intertwined.

Whether those in political power are praised or criticized, both views have in common their regard for supernatural forces as a source of power. This raises a host of questions about the relationship between religion and politics in the construction of postcolonial power relations in Ghana. In my view, any attempt to reduce one to the other—by stating, for instance that politicians simply “use” religion in order to remain in power (Pobee 1992) or that people revert to religion in order to make up for their lack of political power—misses the point. Rather than viewing religion in instrumen-
talist terms and seeking to unmask its “misplaced” purpose, I suggest taking as a point of departure the actual entanglement of the religious and the political and focusing on the “zone grise où de méditations religieuses se confondent, au moins partiellement, au moins temporairement, avec les processus d’innovation politique et économique, sans que l’on puisse parler de leur simple instrumentalisation par les acteurs de l’État ou ceux de l’entreprise” (Bayart 1993: 300). Leaving behind the notion of instrumentalization also implies that any simplistic conceptualization of power relationships in terms of domination versus resistance or collaboration has to be dismissed. As Mbembe has suggested, one has to concentrate instead on the vocabulary and imagery through which the postcolonial African state constitutes a “living space” that is to be shared by those in power and their “subjects” (1992: 4). Thus what has to be examined is the way religious imagery relates to political realities and the form power struggles take in this arena (see Taussig 1997a).4

In Ghana, as elsewhere, popular criticisms of power are often expressed by an imagined association between wealth and political power and occult forces (cf. Geschiere 1997a; Rowlands and Warnier 1988; Shaw 1996). I propose that talking about those in power in terms of the occult stems by no means from a failure to understand modern, allegedly secular politics. These criticisms should rather be seen as part and parcel of ongoing public debates about the (im)morality of power (Lentz 1998; Nugent 1996) and as responses to claims of those in power of being close to (or even almost like) God and of acting in the name of morally sound forces. In fact, political conflict in Ghana appears to be cast in terms of a dialectics of divinization and demonization of power. Therefore, I propose to taking popular criticisms seriously as appropriate political statements, rather than dismissing them as products of “false consciousness” far removed from political realities—the way more conventional political science discourse steeped in secularization theory would have it.

In this essay, I will focus on popular criticisms of power as imbued with occult forces and place these criticisms in the context of public debates about the (im)morality of power. The nexus of occult forces and politics will first be investigated by way of an analysis of a popular Ghanaian video movie that depicts the case of a chief who conducted ritual murder in order to secure money and power. Then I will examine how rumors about politicians involved with occult powers are dealt with in pentecostalist circles. I will argue that pentecostalism appears to be able to contain the occult much better than established mission churches. While the latter prefer not to talk about the “powers of darkness” in public, or even regard them as superstitious figments of popular imagination, pentecostal-charismatic churches take seriously the threat of sorcery and claim that, by relying on the power of God, it would be possible to reveal the occult or “demonic” side of modern politics and eventually “purify” the persons concerned. Taking the existing politico-religious discourse for granted, pente-
costalists seek to free politics from the “powers of darkness” so that it can be governed by the Christian God.

Politics and the Occult: *Nkrabea—My Destiny*

As there is no place in official political discourse for mention of the occult, it is no wonder that such stories are necessarily elusive: they travel from mouth to mouth as rumors and rarely crystallize in the form of written, printed texts. Nevertheless, stories about the occult or magical sources of the power of modern politicians and bureaucrats—as well as traditional chiefs—abound. While it is difficult to find in newspapers and popular magazines written or pictorial traces of popular criticisms of modern politicians demonstrating their involvement in the occult, there is no shortage of stories about the involvement of policemen, soldiers, male and female traders, and traditional chiefs with *jvju*, the popular term for magic (see Meyer 1997). Thus, rumor should be appreciated as a constitutive part of Ghanaian political debate. Francis Nyamnjoh’s suggestion (made with regard to Cameroon) that rumors be viewed “as a sort of ‘black market for information,’ seeking to provide understanding of important events on which the official sources are silent” certainly applies to the Ghanaian situation as well (Nyamnjoh 1997: 104).

Rumors and stories about a person’s involvement with occult forces have also been taken up by the evolving Ghanaian film industry, which is largely made up of self-trained film makers who produce low-budget video movies based on popular accounts. In the course of the 1990s these films have become tremendously popular. They are screened in the cinemas of the big cities as well as in small video theatres in the suburbs, and during the weekends they have virtually replaced foreign films. As I have shown elsewhere, these films celebrate Christian morality but thrive on revealing occult practices that exist on the dark side of modernity (Meyer 1999a).

The film *Nkrabea—My Destiny* (Amahilbee Productions, Ghana 1992) is one of such movies, an early video written and produced by Kwasi Sainti Baffoe-Bonnie based on the case of the “ritual murder” of nine-year-old Kofi Kyintoe at Sefwi-Bekwai. Baffoe-Bonnie, who comes from the area, conducted extensive research, interviews with eyewitnesses and examinations of court documents. Taking up a “true story” which had been extensively reported in the newspapers and thus became a national scandal, the film drew a huge crowd of spectators. Recently it has been shown again on television.

At the outset of the movie brief texts appear on the screen about cases of ritual murder in Ghana and other parts of the world, including Mexico, the United States, and Nigeria. Since the phenomenon of “ritual murder” is represented as a universal crime that may take place anywhere, the occurrence of such a case in Ghana does not appear as a result of local circum-
stances, but as part and parcel of a larger whole. This delocalizing representational strategy also informs the first scene, which leads the viewers into the bush at night where men dressed in raffia skirts and the female symbol drawn in white chalk on their chests dance around a fire. The high priest, a man with rasta hair, slaughters a child covered by a white cloth and sitting on the shoulders of Nana Addae, the principal character in the film. No reference is made to any local Ghanaian religious practice; the film makes use, rather, of the most prototypical images of primitiveness, witchcraft, and satanism, thereby asserting that this type of ritual murder is not peculiar to Ghanaian culture.

Nana (i.e., “chief”) Addae is a respected man at Sefwi-Bekwai, a small rural town in the western region with ten thousand inhabitants. He was poor in the past and his wife had to struggle to make ends meet for him and their two daughters. When, quite suddenly, he becomes rich, he has eyes only for women and cars. After he has insulted his wife in public by openly flirting with a young girl, a quarrel ensues which ends with the expulsion of the wife and children from the house, a huge villa with all modern conveniences and guarded by a servant nicknamed “Soldier.” This villa has one secret room which is always locked and contains Nana Addae’s shrine, a human head surrounded by candles. Here he prays to his god Degadu, who makes him rich in return for annual human sacrifices. The film depicts Nana Addae praying to his god whenever he needs supernatural assistance: “[O]pen the way for me, turn their minds upside down . . ., let them have no ears to hear others, no eyes to see others and no mouth to talk to others, except me, your faithful servant. Degadu, you reign supreme.” Having prayed in this way, Nana Addae removes a white handkerchief from the shrine. It is through this object that he is able to turn people’s minds in such a way that they concentrate on him and forget about all others. When he visits the ministries in Accra to find out whether he has been assigned a building contract, he takes the handkerchief along. At first, an unimpeachable officer lets him know that his offer is unacceptable because his price is 200 percent higher than that of the chosen candidate. But when Nana Addae takes out his handkerchief to wipe his face, the officer becomes confused and eventually does give the contract to Nana Addae. Addae celebrates his success with his new girlfriend, a young village girl who admires him for his money, power, and generosity, but who has no idea about the evil sources of his wealth.

Yet at Sefwi-Bekwai not everybody is enthusiastic about Nana Addae. His girlfriend’s father distrusts his sudden wealth, and there are rumors associating him with the annual disappearance since 1982 of a child from the town. For that reason strangers such as national service personnel refuse to stay in the town, and some people feel that the reputation of Sefwi-Bekwai is at stake. A young man talks to the inhabitants and urges them to keep their eyes open. Shortly afterward he finds a human head in a plastic bag near his living quarters and learns that Nana Addae was
responsible for its delivery. He goes to confront Nana Addae, but just after he has launched his accusation, Nana Addae takes out his handkerchief, offers him a drink, and delivers a long, remarkable monologue about the power of money, whilst wiping his face continuously with the handkerchief:

Look, just be patient and listen to me before you decide to go to the police station.
To me, money is not all things.
To me, money is everything.
More money means more respect.
More influence.
More power.
And once you have money and power you can rule the whole world.
You can buy all the cars that you want: a Mercedes, BMW, Hyundai, Pathfinder... Name it!
And you can choose between all the girls that you fancy: slim, tall, short, fat one...
You can even buy a human being if you want to.
That is the power of money.
Whatever I say, everybody listens.
Every woman, every mother will want you to marry one of her daughters.
Any time you speak, everybody listens.
They will heap on you a lot of titles: Nana, Uncle, Me wura [My Lord],
Obarima [Strong Man], Okatakyie [The Mighty One], Ahuna bobirem [The Fearsome One].
You will be in the company of very big people and at every function they want you to be the chairman, the president or life patron.
In fact you are virtually worshipped.
You know what, you can make other miserable people’s lives happy.

He takes a sip of whisky and continues:

Tell me, have you seen a poor man with friends?
A poor man has no friends.
A poor man has no loving, good marriage.
A poor man’s wife is always angry.
His children never laugh.
Now, think about it.
Just keep quiet about this incident and I’ll make you one of the richest men in this whole country.
Money and power talk, that is the real world of today.
What do you say?
Sika ye mogya. Sika ye moga.

The speech and the handkerchief do their work; the man agrees to become part of Nana’s “secret ministry” and departs with a huge sum of money. Nana urges his assistants to be careful in the future as his prestige is at stake.
One Sunday, while Nana Addae is in church, his girlfriend appears at his house. She looks into all rooms upstairs and finds the secret room unlocked and with a human head inside. Agitated and shouting, she runs home, whereupon her alarmed parents take her to church, where the preacher is praising Nana Addae for his generous gifts and urging all members to follow his good example. The parents march up to the altar and implore the pastor to deliver their daughter from what has possessed her. But following his prayer another woman in the congregation begins to act as though she too is possessed, dancing to the front and addressing Nana Addae: “Thou shall not kill. The Lord shall triumph over Satan, the Devil. God is supreme. Amen. God is King. Amen.”

In the meantime, Degadu needs another human sacrifice, and a young man who asks Nana Addae for a loan is told to bring him the head of his nephew Kofi Nkrabea in return for 3 million Cedis. Again the handkerchief does its work and the man agrees. Kofi is a bright, obedient, helpful boy, the source of enduring happiness to his poor uncle and grandmother. One Sunday, instead of going to church, he follows his uncle into the bush, talking, among other subjects, about his determination to be a doctor when he grows up and always take care of his uncle. But in the bush he is slaughtered by two confederates of the uncle, who then sets off to deliver Kofi’s head to Nana. On the way, suddenly stricken with remorse for what he has done, the uncle gets drunk, arriving at Nana’s house after the latter has left for Accra. He hears a man in the house calling for Soldier, the watchman, and he runs away terrified, chased by Soldier and soon by an ever increasing number of other people who drag him to the police station where the crime is detected.

Eventually a trial takes place, which is broadcast on television to the whole of Ghana. Nana Addae tries his best to manipulate the female judge with his handkerchief, but the spirit of his dead nephew appears to Kofi’s uncle, breaking Nana’s spell and freeing the uncle to confess what really happened. The judge asserts that a human head is not “a commodity” and that the laws of Ghana should “protect all classes of persons, irrespective of age, status and origin” and that “no Ghanaian by reason of wealth or power will be allowed to take advantage.” Nana Addae and his companions are sentenced to death by firing squad for having committed “ritual murder.”

I have chosen to discuss this film here because I am intrigued by its ambivalent attitude toward money and power. On the one hand, money is represented as the source of prestige and esteem. This is not only stated in Nana Addae’s speech but is also made clear through people’s attitude toward him, and this social reality certainly resonates with the experiences of the audience. Over and over again I have witnessed how rich people are hailed in Ghana, how they are respected in church and wherever they can display their wealth and flaunt their generosity. In all sorts of contexts, the rich and powerful are praised and presented as examples. Those who do not have
money—the so-called “small boys”—look up to the rich and seek to draw closer to them, setting aside any doubts about the sources of that money. Clearly, in this film, as well as in Ghanaian society in general, money is strongly associated with power (cf. Nugent 1996: 3; Van der Geest 1997), and the poor look for assistance from the rich in order to get by.9

The link between money and power is by no means a postcolonial phenomenon only. As Ivor Wilks (1993) has shown, precolonial Akan states rewarded the individual accumulation of wealth with titles, and this conversion of economic success into political power has become a characteristic feature in colonial and postcolonial Ghana. (Nugent also talks about the “incestuous relationship between wealth and political power” in present-day Ghana [1995: 279].) While one should certainly be hesitant to assume that the relationship between money and power in present-day Ghana simply reproduces the Akan model, there can be no doubt that this model is often referred to in the ongoing animated debates about the (im)morality of power. As Carola Lentz has argued, “in this debate the different images of ‘good wealth’ and ‘good governance’, of Akan, Christian or other vintage, are brought into play and criticize and/or reinforce each other” (1998: 48). The film discussed here, in fact, ties right into these debates—and, of course, has triggered further ones.

The film leaves open the question of whether Nana Addae is a “real” chief in charge of an inherited stool, or whether, in line with Akan tradition, he has been able to become a “big man” as a result of his wealth.10 Political power is surely a prerogative of wealth—both in the arena of “traditional” and “modern” politics—and power, in turn, is easily convertible into wealth. In this way Nana Addae is an exponent of a longstanding, and more or less accepted, practice. On the other hand, people are concerned about the morality of wealth and power and suspicious about their possible occult sources (see Meyer 1995). Speaking to these suspicions, the film shows that Nana Addae came to power and the possession of his magical handkerchief through the secret worship of his personal and bloodthirsty god, Degadu. This object as such does not strike any innocent person as special because a white handkerchief is part of the standard equipment of any well-dressed person—an icon of “civilization”—and also of anybody attending a Spiritual or Pentecostalist Church where handkerchiefs are waved during dance sessions. This seemingly ordinary object enables Nana Addae to make people forsake their moral principles and fall in with his plans—just as Nkrumah, as popular discourse has it, manipulated others. His power, thus, is not generated from below—as in the case of a good chief or, of course, of a political discourse that claims to generate power from the “people”—but rather from a spell cast on anybody standing in his way, and it is virtually indiscernable by an ordinary human being unable to penetrate the realm of the invisible. Nana Addae represents a nightmarish vision of an immoral leader whom no one can help following because he is supported by occult powers. Indeed, in the film only the spirit of the dead
Kofi is able to break that spell and make his uncle say the truth, and only the Spirit of God, who speaks through the possessed woman, can tell what is really going on.

The film thus reveals that Nana Addae’s wealth and power are morally bad because they are acquired at the expense of others. The money he accumulates is not generated through work or other honest means, but through supernatural methods; the film enacts the classical theme of witchcraft suspicions and accusations (Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1995; Rowlands and Warnier 1988). Yet while witches usually are thought to operate among blood relations, Nana Addae needs the blood of a stranger, an innocent child. In his person the semantic domains of witchcraft and chieftaincy blend. If witchcraft represents “the dark side of kinship” (Geschiere 1994), Nana Addae’s occult practices represent the dark side of chieftaincy: he is a “big man” because he “eats” his subjects for his own profit; his power and wealth are generated by taking away life. His “stool” only works in his own favor; anybody outside his “secret ministry” is a potential victim. Both the source and the use he makes of his money are profoundly antisocial. Hence Nana Addae is the prototype of the selfish leader, the “vampire-chief.”

This theme of an exchange of human blood for money is pervasive in Ghanaian society. There are plenty of rumors—and also some “confessions” made in pentecostalist circles—that attribute the achievement of wealth to the ritual murder of close relatives and spouses (Meyer 1995). Moreover, I have heard people discuss cases of ritual murder committed by people like Nana Addae who aspire to wealth and power and need human parts such as heads, bones, or sexual organs, which they may obtain from strangers.11 It is difficult for me to assess whether human parts really are traded and used in certain shrines with the intention of making people rich. Yet the fact that such stories are told shows that there is a link in the popular imagination between the achievement of money and power, on the one hand, and human sacrifice, on the other.12 Wealth and power generated in exchange for life are considered highly problematic, and in this sense the film resonates with prevalent views and offers a moral critique of ill-gotten wealth.

While in this film Nana Addae and his companions are eventually punished by the state (represented by the judge, who asserts that according to the laws of Ghana human beings may not be treated as commodities), it would be wrong to assume that the critical discourse about wealth and power is limited to the sphere of “traditional” politics and trade or that the state would be involved only as a protector of its subjects. This discourse can easily be extended to those wielding political power in the modern state. For instance, prior to the elections, the Ghanaian Chronicle, a private newspaper critical of the government, suggested that the accidental death of the driver of Central Regional Minister Vallis Akyianu might be regarded as a case of “ritual murder” (Nov. 4–6, 1996), and popular rumors imme-
diately took this for granted and added that this murder was committed in order to ensure Vallis’s reelection. Governmental authorities reacted angrily and took the paper to court, thereby making it clear that they disapproved of such stories being turned into public news items.

Asserting that there may be more to power and money than mere outward appearance would have us believe, popular critical discourse suggests that a realm of occult forces, invisible to the naked eye, might nevertheless operate effectively in everyday life. It suggests that power may stem not from “the people,” as the language of democracy claims, but from secret rites in a hidden room where it is generated in exchange for life and for the sake of personal profit. Yet as the film shows, it is almost impossible to eschew the “big man” and to change the symbolics of power. One never knows what is really going on behind the beautiful outward appearance of money and power—the Mercedes Benz, the villa, the exquisite clothes, the refined manners—and anybody seeking assistance from a big man can easily, if unconsciously, align himself or herself with the occult. Because there is no room in this shared “living space” for a radical questioning of the symbolics of power and power relations, popular critical discourse is confined to feeding a strong desire to reveal what is really happening beneath the surface and to fueling a continuous production of rumors about hidden sources of money and power.15 Indeed, although denied a place in the front stage of the public arena, such stories become “public secrets,” that is, they become part and parcel of a political struggle over concealment and revelation (Taussig 1997b). Popular views seek to bring into the open what those in power are held to be hiding. In this sense, attempts to reveal occult sources of power and money certainly constitute a critical political act, albeit criticism raised from within.

At exactly this point, pentecostalism enters politics. In order to understand pentecostalism’s stance toward, or perhaps better, its position in, the nexus of power and sorcery, it would be useful to discuss briefly the film’s church scene. Remember that while the pastor is praising Nana Addae—an act that testifies to the pastor’s inability to look into people’s minds and his own eagerness to get money—a woman becomes possessed and accuses Nana Addae of murder. This woman certainly behaves as a member of a pentecostalist church, where much room is given to dreams and visions, especially in order to expose occult sources of present troubles (and where, at least sometimes, the capacity to “see” is attributed to women). Her statement that God is supreme and will triumph over Satan suggests that Nana Addae has involved himself with the Devil. Indeed, according to Christian—and especially pentecostalist—views, the worship of gods amounts to Devil-worship, as they are regarded as demons and agents of Satan (Meyer 1992; 1999b). Nana Addae’s reaction, which is to leave the church immediately, makes it clear to the audience that the woman certainly spoke the truth. For as everyone knows, gods such as Degadu do not wish to hear about the supremacy of the Christian God. In this scene the film refers
explicitly to the alleged power of pentecostalism to penetrate the surface of a beautiful, generous appearance and to reveal what remains hidden to the naked eye. Indeed, the claim of being able to provide revelations of the occult aspects of power and money—modernity’s dark side—is one of the crucial features of pentecostalism. How this works in the political field will be discussed in the following section.

Pentecostalism and Occult Forces

Ever since I visited Ghana for the first time in 1988, I have been struck by the significant presence of Christian churches, especially that of the pentecostal-charismatic type, in public space.\textsuperscript{14} Everywhere in Accra, one finds posters advertising one or another miracle healing session or prayer service. Both established newspapers and popular tabloids give much room to pentecostalist preachers, pentecostalist proselytizing and debate about morality flourish on television and radio, and popular videos take up typically pentecostalist concerns. As soon as night falls one can find in virtually every corner people clapping their hands and praising the Lord and people exorcising demons. As I have shown elsewhere, the attraction of pentecostalism is not confined to the capital, but also has a strong impact in rural areas, where it gives rise to much conflict with, and within, established mission churches (Meyer 1999b).

Christianity became increasingly popular in Ghana after 1983, that is, after a period of severe political and economic crisis.\textsuperscript{15} Very much against the spirit of Rawlings’s “revolution,” people in great numbers turned their back on the state, which failed completely at delivering services and goods to its citizens, and approached churches as alternative avenues to success. In a fascinating study, Paul Gifford (1998) has shown that the mainline churches represented by the Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Church contested the legitimacy of Rawlings’s government and provided the funds and a space to organize social and economic networks. In this way these churches clearly formed an alternative structure to the state (and, indeed, often surpassed its limited financial possibilities), and hence they can be viewed as institutions of civil society par excellence. While the membership of these churches remained more or less stable (often due to the introduction of pentecostally oriented prayer groups within the church [Meyer 1992]), churches in the pentecostal-charismatic spectrum gained a great number of new followers, especially from the so-called Spiritual or African Independent Churches (Gifford 1998: 62/63).\textsuperscript{16} By and large, the pentecostal-charismatic churches were little inclined to venture into politics and contest the legitimacy of Rawlings. They concentrated instead on the propagation of success, health, and wealth—quite an attractive promise given the troubles experienced by people at the grassroots. For even after Rawlings by the end of the 1980s had opened up Ghana to IMF policies of
structural adjustment (as a result of which Western commodities became available in the country after an extended period of scarcity), economic hardship continued to trouble ordinary Ghanaians, while those close to Rawlings were said to become richer and richer.

At least until the beginning of the 1990s, the relationship between the Christian churches and Rawlings’s PNDC government was strained. Accusing Christianity of contributing to the colonization of the African mind through the destruction of indigenous religions traditions, the government favored the return to African religion as propogated, for instance, by the Afrikania movement founded by the former Catholic priest Damuah (Boogaard 1993).17 The government was particularly suspicious of the explosive rise of pentecostal-charismatic churches in the years after 1983, and it criticized them for their negative attitude toward African culture.18 During the 1980s, the churches and the state more or less coexisted, without interfering directly in each other’s affairs: politics and Christianity were kept more or less separate.

This changed in 1989, when the PNDC, in an attempt to exert control over religious affairs, passed a law (PNDC law 221) which required all churches, the mainline denominations represented in the Christian Council included, to register with the National Commission on Culture. This law was met with fierce resistance, especially on the part of the Christian Council churches and the Catholic Church, which refused to register at all. Eventually, the PNDC government had to refrain from attempting to monitor church activities and even allowed back into the country hitherto forbidden organizations such as the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, one important result of the conflict between the government and the churches was the politicizing of religious activities, especially on the part of Christian Council churches which criticized the government and called for multiparty elections and a return to democracy (Gifford 1998: 69ff; Nugent 1996: 187ff).19 The churches in the pentecostal-charismatic spectrum, as Gifford has shown, accepted registration much more easily because it was regarded as an avenue toward increased respectability (Gifford 1998: 76ff.). They started to move beyond their sole focus on church affairs, and started venturing into politics in the wake of Ghana’s return to democracy in 1992.

Though pentecostalism is not organized in one single association but consists, rather, of a plethora of different and sometimes rival churches (founded by different prophets), it is possible in my view to speak of a pentecostalist complex because these churches have so much in common. Interestingly, the pentecostal-charismatic churches place much more emphasis on Christianity as a “world religion” than the former mission churches whose theologians currently attempt to Africanize Christianity.20 The pentecostal-charismatic churches have little interest in typically African forms of expressing faith and instead organize services and prayer sessions according to established pentecostal forms. There are frequent contacts with Euro-
pean and American pentecostal-charismatic associations, who help to establish so-called Bible Schools for the training of pastors.

There exists the idea—stimulated by the book of Revelation—that the end of the world has come near and that Satan tries all over the world to prevent people from following God and being saved. There is, as it were, a worldwide conspiracy in which everybody on earth has become entangled, if only unconsciously. Yet, since Satan can operate on a worldwide scale only by making use of local agents, local pentecostal-charismatic churches are given the task of struggling against Satan’s particular representatives. The global war against the Devil is to be fought everywhere. Representing the world in terms of an opposition between God and the Devil, these churches offer their members an elaborate discourse about evil spirits, that is, a whole range of local spiritual entities such as old deities and ancestor spirits. They speak about witchcraft, native medicines and “juju,” and also “modern” magical powers derived from India or from the bottom of the ocean. All these spiritual entities are said to be servants of Satan whose worship will make a person’s spirit and body accessible to his evil machinations and will eventually result in destruction and death. Consistent with the worldwide spiritual war going on between God and the Devil, there is also a war taking place within a person’s individual spirit. Pentecostalist preachers claim to be able to penetrate the invisible and to bring about physical healing and improvement of material conditions by fighting a spiritual battle against demons.

These views are spread through newspapers, popular magazines, television discussions, and radio programs. With their increasing involvement in politics in the course of Ghana’s return to democracy, pentecostalists have developed a distinct dualistic political theology which asserts that Ghana can prosper and progress only with a God-fearing leader (Gifford 1998: 85), and conversely, I would like to add, would be brought down by a leader relying on occult forces. Not only do the pentecostalists partake in discussions about certain topics, but, even more important, their presence in the political arena shapes the terms that constitute political discourse. Although it is impossible to reduce the variety of attitudes toward politics in pentecostal circles to one statement, one can safely state that the popular notion of a possible relationship between political power and the occult is widely shared and spread. In distinction to mainline mission churches, pentecostalism easily incorporates popular rumors and stories such as the case of Nana Addae. Here, the hidden presence of the occult in politics is a point of departure for further reflection, not a superstition to be discarded.

For instance, a leading article in the Watchman (obviously an anti-NDC paper) warned that “democracy in the hands of the wrong people will do much more harm to us than the worst dictatorship we ever lived under in this nation.” According to the paper, in the past democracy has been a mask behind which bad things happened:
Past experiences have shown that many parties, including some which eventually won elections, started with the wrong motives, methods and approaches. We have had many tribalised parties in the past; and many others born in fetish houses, with all kinds of accompanying rituals. We have seen violent partisan clashes, some resulting in the death of many of our citizens. There were stories about ritual murder in high and low places, for favours from lesser gods. If Christians would agree and pray, I believe it will be impossible for politicians and parties which dabble in the occult, to rule us in the next four years. (27 October–10 November 1996: 1)

Clearly, leading politicians are accused here of being immersed in the occult sphere so that democracy becomes a farce: they owe their power to fetishes and ritual murder, rather than to the people who cast their votes. At the same time, prayer is presented as an appropriate means of political action. In what follows I will investigate in some detail these two aspects of the pentecostal-charismatic attitude toward politics—the revelation of the occult, and the recourse to prayer in order to reorient politics toward God.

Because the characterization of politics as potentially indebted to occult powers is widely shared in pentecostal-charismatic circles, popular stories about the dark side of power are easily absorbed into their discourse as examples of the machinations of Satan. Moreover, through the institution of confession, pentecostalists themselves produce similar accounts of their past involvements with the occult, thereby claiming to reveal what is really going on behind the beautiful mask of power. In Another Life, The Power-Packed Magazine, a new periodical that appears to address the wealthier part of the pentecostal-charismatic spectrum, I came across the fascinating confession of the businessman Seth Avevor, a leading member of the Full Gospel Men’s Fellowship International (Vol 1[2], 1996: 34 ff). Through this confession insight can be gained into the pentecostal-charismatic politics of revelation.

During the reign of Acheampong, Avevor states, he worked at the Castle where he was appointed Special Assistant to the commissioner responsible for national security. He had money, cars, and women, and he felt that “we wielded power in Ghana” (ibid.: 34). One day his boss told him that he would need extra spiritual protection, and so he was sent to a “fetish priest” at Winneba (a Fanti-town, about forty kilometers east of Accra) who performed some rituals for him. Avevor’s special assignment was

to go round the world seeking powers to keep our people in authority. The assignments took us to villages, shrines, mallams, spiritual churches, the lodges, and so on, no matter the distance or cost. We went to places where all types of rings and other occultic items were obtained to protect people in authority (ibid.).

They went as far as Senegal and Gambia, where a priest assured them that he had reversed all bad events that were destined to occur in their lives. Yet,
shortly after this visit, the Acheampong regime was brought down, and Avevor wondered where all the powers and protection had gone. His answer: “The devil has power, but his power is limited. Where the devil’s power ends that is where the power of Jesus begins” (ibid.). Many powerful people were killed in the coup, and he himself was arrested. In prison, he started to pray and this was the beginning of his conversion, which culminated in his becoming born again and attending the Full Gospel Men’s Fellowship International in 1983.

Because a confession is presented as a first-hand, eyewitness report, the association between politics and the occult in Avevor’s account is particularly convincing. By revealing what goes on in the normally impenetrable realm of darkness, Avevor shows that during the Acheampong regime there was no such thing as secular politics (see Pobee 1992). In order to remain in power, he suggests, politicians aligned themselves with the anti-social, violent powers and searched for occult items to protect their authority. The end of the Acheampong regime did not, of course, put an end to such stories. Despite all attempts by Rawlings and the (P)NDC to inscribe their politics in the register of the divine—and despite all the assistance they received from supportive charismatic preachers such as Nicholas Duncan-Williams—suspicious rumors still circulate about them.

Avevor’s confession (and the genre as a whole) seeks to assert the revelatory capacity of pentecostalism: here vision is provided through which people are able to penetrate the otherwise unaccessible realm of darkness without involving themselves with occult powers. Indeed, pentecostalism presents itself as the sole agent able to attack politicians’ secret power and lead politics away from the occult. Through prayer individuals can, like Avevor, be purified from their involvement with the occult and be born again. Once purified, such a person may even assume power in Christian circles, precisely because he or she can claim to be familiar with the Enemy. Prayer is also employed collectively in order to purify and transform politics. For instance, in early 1994 the pentecostal-charismatic churches organized a thanksgiving service for Rawlings in which they prayed over him, and thus, in fact, legitimized him (Gifford 1998: 86). A year later, when all Christian churches organized a thanksgiving service together, Duncan-Williams claimed that God’s invisible hand was with and over Rawlings. In contrast, the representatives of the mainline churches attributed the successful shift to democracy not to God but to adherence to the constitution (ibid.). Again during the 1996 elections pentecostalists of various churches combined forces and organized so-called All-night Prayer Meetings (which would last from 6 P.M. until after midnight, sometimes until dawn) during which they implored God to let his elect candidate win the elections. In this way, pentecostalists define their political action as an attempt to reveal the occult sources of power, to shift politics from the realm of the occult to that of the divine, and to purify those in power through prayer.

Not only in pentecostal-charismatic circles but also in Christian circles
in general, politics is represented as being in dire need of purification through the Christian God. An editorial in *Pentecost Fire*, the “official magazine of the Church of pentecost,” embraced the statement of the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the Rev. A. A. Beeko, that Christians were to “have an antiseptic influence on our society.” “Politics per se,” the editorial asserted

is not a dirty game. It is the involvement of godless people with selfish motives that tarnishes politics and makes it a dirty business. The greater the involvement of God-fearing men in politics, the less “dirty” it will be. (July–September 1996:3)

There are many similar attempts to appropriate political discourse by casting it in Christian terms. The characteristic feature of pentecostalism is that it devotes much more attention to the revelation of the “dirty” and occult than the mission churches, which do not talk as much about the Devil or the “powers of darkness” (see Meyer 1999b) and are less engaged in transferring political leaders from the realm of the occult to that of the divine through purificatory prayers.

In contrast to the predominantly transnational orientation of Nigerian pentecostals analyzed by Marshall-Fratani (1998), Ghanaian pentecostals consciously and purposely speak to national concerns. In the course of the 1990s, pentecostalism has become a force in the political arena which those in power can no longer neglect. Even during the 1992 elections, Rawlings himself showed a much more accommodating stance toward the churches than ever before. The reason for this, I think, is that he recognized the tremendous social importance of these churches and their ability to mobilize people on a mass basis. Even though pentacostalist churches generally hold negative attitudes about “tradition” and “African religion,” Rawlings preferred to cooperate with their populist leaders rather than having to rely on the elite clergy of the mainline churches (Gifford 1998: 70–71). He even attended prayer meetings organized by churches of the pentecostal-charismatic type, and on one occasion, I was told, he wept in a prayer service and asked for forgiveness for the violence in the early years of his reign. This positive attitude continued in the wake of the 1996 elections, when Ghanaian politics came to be constituted as a battlefield between the powers of God and Satan and the responsibility for the future of the nation was made to depend on the individual believers, their prayers and votes, and on the moral standards of politicians. It remains to be seen how (and how successfully) pentecostalists will operate in the future in this politico-religious arena whose terms they helped to set. In any case, one should be careful about assuming that they merely tend to support those in power, as suggested by Gifford (1998), who emphasizes Duncan-Williams’s attempts to purify Rawlings and turn him into a divinely sanctioned leader. For next to this strategy of divinization, demonization of those in power remains an
important option. Rather than having a fixed stance toward those in power, pentecostalism’s attitude is ambivalent and and is shaped to a large extent by public debates about the (im)morality of power. Thus even if pentecostalists’ prayers for the moral purification of politics fail to achieve their ideal, they still have a lot of political work to do: for the “dirtier” and the more indebted to the occult politics may appear to be, the more they can claim power by stating that they are able to reveal the public secrets which are supposed to live behind the new mask of democracy.

How can one write about politics and sorcery in Africa without evoking an image of this continent as hopelessly backward, fundamentally different and exotic? This question kept haunting me during my struggle to write this essay and I am still not sure what my answer is. But for me not writing about this relationship at all was out of the question. Far too long social science discourse has failed to recognize “the modernity of witchcraft” (Geschiere 1997) and therefore has been unable to grasp the nexus of politics and sorcery. For this reason further research in this field is important. My question really concerns how such research should be conducted. One thing I am certain of is that one should be very attentive to regional specificity and particularity. Rather than taking for granted the existence of a distinctly African nexus of sorcery and politics and assuming that it operates all over the African continent in more or less the same way, social scientists should undertake local studies that focus on the historicity and peculiarity of what comes to be translated as “witchcraft” or “sorcery” in politics. Only in this way will it be possible to generate well-grounded studies for making comparisons both within Africa and between Africa and other regions.

Second, one should be careful not to approach politics in Africa only and automatically through the prism of sorcery. While it is important to consider that belief in occult forces may hold an important place in modern societies and to understand that rumors about the occult sources of money and power are critical political statements, one should never suggest that in Africa the terms within which political debates and debates about politics take place are set once and for all. It is important to conduct research into specific cases and with a historical perspective. Only in this way will it be possible to discern and explain similarities and differences with regard to the place and role of the occult in various African countries.

In this paper I have tried to show that once pentecostalists entered Ghanaian politics, they were not satisfied just to reveal occult sources, but they were able to recast politics quite successfully in terms of a rigid dualism of God and the Devil. In this way, they introduced a more complex imagery which enabled them to claim that they alone had power to purify politics from all occult traces and bring themselves and politicians closer to God. The fact that political discourse prior to the 1996 elections was cast in these Christian, dualistic terms testifies to the success of pentecostalist
imagery. Against the background of these shifts, I think that it is fruitful to investigate the emergence of sorcery and Christianity (and of course, Islam) in political discourse as part of a wider relationship between religion and modernity which has to be studied in a historical-comparative perspective.

Finally, I have realized that part of my question about how to write about politics and sorcery entails awareness that a basic problem lies in the failure of social science discourse to account for the public importance of religion in modern societies. The solution is therefore not to find acceptable (and politically correct) cultural translations for what is going on “over there” (with ideas such as the “rationality” of witchcraft), but to undertake a radical questioning of the concepts through which modernity is constituted in terms of increasing rationalization, secularization and other components of modernization theory, and through which the “enlightened” West is always placed above the Rest.21 In my view, Africanists have a lot of homework to do in terms of examining the legacy of our professional discourse. At the same time, by conducting research in Africa with open eyes and ears, we eventually may be able to develop new perspectives which do not simply confirm modernity’s Western self-image, but rather offer new terms for conceptualizing modernity.

References


The Power of Money

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this essay were presented in the panel “Sorcery and Politics” (ASA, Columbus, Ohio, 1998) and at the “14th Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual.” For stimulating comments I would like to thank Daniel Arhinful, Gerd Baumann, Diane Ciekawy, Peter Geschiere, Reinhilde Konig, Peter Pels, Patricia Spyer, Peter van Rooden, Peter van der Veern, and Jojada Verrips.

2. According to Christian tradition, the Devil should be placed to the left and the angel to the right. It is important to note that the arrangement on the poster, though “wrong” from the point of view of the man on the poster, is “right” from the perspective of the observer. Because of this reversal, the poster in fact appears to present a mirror image to the observer, thereby making him recognize the dilemma of the man depicted as his own dilemma.


4. An analysis of this entanglement can only be complete if one examines Ghanaian politics in a historical and comparative perspective. One has to investigate not only the relationship between religion and politics in postcolonial Ghana, but also in the colonial state, which may have represented the ideal type of secular government to a much lesser extent than was the claim of colonial ideology (see e.g., Fields 1982 for colonial Central Africa, and Van der Veer 1994 for colonial India). However, such a detailed study certainly exceeds the scope of this paper. My intention here is much more modest and I will confine myself to popular criticisms of power in terms of the occult.

5. Njamnjob notes a similar phenomenon in Cameroon. His argument is that political rumors are not necessarily false, but rather should be regarded as a sort of ‘black market for information,’ seeking to provide understanding of important events on which the official sources are silent.

6. Baffoe-Bonnie told me that he tried to stay as close to the facts as possible, and that his film “took Ghana by storm.” Even the First Lady Nana Konadu called him and praised the film.

7. All these are Akan titles. With many thanks to Daniel Kojo Arhinful for his transcription and translation of these terms.

8. The phrase “a poor man, no friend” is a common expression which many bus owners write on their vehicles. Sika fre mogya is an Akan proverb that means “money is life,” “money is blood.” I am most grateful to Sjaak van der Geest for this translation.

9. The Akan proverb sika fre mogya (“money is blood,” i.e., money calls relatives), testifies to this attitude: once a person has made money, poorer relatives suddenly will visit and be full of devotion.

10. This theme is also taken up by another video-movie entitled “Mataa—The Power of Money. Our Missing Children.” In this film a mischievous cocaine dealer, who also sacrifices children on the altar of his Indian goddess, tries to become the chief of the town.

11. During my last stay in Ghana in June 1998, there was a lot of talk about ritual murder, which was especially associated with wealthy Nigerians, who were supposed to come to Ghana in order to look for victims. These ideas are certainly further popularized through Nigerian video movies such as “Blood Money” in
which ritual murder and trade in human body parts are revealed to be the source of wealth (see Meyer 1998b). On rumors about the use of human parts in Nigeria, see Bastian (1998).

12. It is tempting to speculate about the origins of such ideas: Can one, following the lines suggested by Shaw (1996) trace them back to the time of the slave trade and chiefs’ attempts to generate more power? Do they relate to the “black stools” of chiefs, whose power also thrived on human sacrifice?

13. As in the case of political discourse in Sierra Leone examined by Shaw (1996), this discourse is not so much engaged in ridiculing power and spelling out its banality, as suggested by Mbembe, but rather in depicting its violent, destructive dimension.

14. Next to pentecostal churches of the older type represented by denominations such as the Church of Pentecost, the Apostolic Church, and the Assemblies of God, a newer type of pentecostalism recently emerged especially in urban areas. Called “charismatic” and including organizations such as Mensa Otabil’s International Central Gospel Church, Bishop Nicholas Duncan William’s Christian Action Faith Ministries and the Rev. Sam K. Ankrah’s International Bible Worship Centre, these churches were founded by Ghanaians in the mid-1980s, are strongly internationally oriented, and have branches in Europe and the United States (see Gifford 1994; Van Dijk 1997). The new “charismatic” churches appeal especially to young and middle-aged people of both sexes for whom success in life is not a mere dream and who have started to prosper, often by being involved in international trade.

15. In 1983, 1.2 million Ghanaian workers were expelled from Nigeria and forced to return home. Drought and a number of uncontrollable bush fires led to the collapse of food production, and there was an attempted coup against the PNDC-government (see Nugent 1992).

16. Many people initially approach a pentecostalist church in order to solve problems related to health and wealth, and in many cases move from one church to another until the desired result is achieved. Most members are either middle-aged married women, who often have to rely on themselves and take care of their children without receiving much assistance from their (absent and/or jobless) husbands, or young educated men and women, that is, people worrying about their future and experiencing a great gap between dreams and actual possibilities. In terms of social placement, these churches are most attractive to people who attempt to move upward economically, mainly by business and trade, yet have relatively little power in the male-oriented gerontocratic power structure which still is of great importance in Ghanaian society. Many of them seek to liberate themselves socially and economically from their extended families and to be successful in life independently.

17. For that reason, Damuah was assigned an important role in government and received time to broadcast his mission on radio. This happened much to the dismay of Christians, who regarded him as an agent of the Devil.

18. It also criticized the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses for their disrespect toward political authority, and even banned them for some time.

19. In any case, it seems to be difficult to make general statements about the stance churches in the pentecostal-charismatic spectrum have held toward the government. Possibly pentecostalists were also stimulated to enter politics through the example of pentecostal circles in Nigeria, who understand themselves as being involved in a struggle with Muslims over the control over the state.
20. The attempts of the Moderator N. K. Dzobo to Africanize the form and content of the Christian message in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church met so much resistance from a pentecostalist prayer group in the church that it split away from the mother church and became independent as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana. On this conflict see Meyer 1992, 1999b.

21. For an intriguing attempt to de-exoticize African witchcraft through intercultural comparison of witch-doctors and American spin-doctors, see Geschiere 1998.