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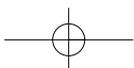
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PART II

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRAL GOSPEL CHURCH



2

Mensa Otabil

Marketing charisma, making religious celebrity

Introduction

On a Sunday morning as so many Sunday mornings in Accra I take a shared taxi from Dansoman to 'Central,' as Mensa Otabil's International Central Gospel Church is colloquially known. We pass the roadside art workshop on Dansoman Highstreet, where Otabil's portrait smiles at me together with four of Ghana's biggest musical stars, Kojo Antwi, Daddy Lumba, Lord Kenya, and Tic Tac, and with the world's political hero Nelson Mandela (fig. 2.1). It is the painter's reproduction of the official photograph of Otabil as it appears on ICGC products, depicting him in 'royal' kente cloth over a white shirt, sitting on a Victorian style arm chair (fig. 2.2). Otabil's motto 'Vision, Perception, Action' boosts the painter's workshop. Church traffic has started; everywhere well-dressed people are queuing for trotros or trying to stop taxis. A young couple joins me on the back seat. She wears a fashionable African dress and holds a lady's bag on her lap and a white hankie in her hand. He wears a black pantaloons and a white shirt and tie and holds his bible, notebook, and pen in his hand. Our driver has tuned into JoyFM and the deep voice of pastor Otabil teaches us that 'if we want our nation to develop, the laws by which we rule ourselves must be righteous.' My new friends go to Winners' Chapel, but they love to listen to Otabil. 'He brings down the word of God for everybody to understand,' says Emmanuel. 'Yes, he talks about the real problems we face in Ghana,' says Linda as we drive past 'to be removed' ramshackle kiosks built over open, rubbish-clogged sewers. 'There is hope for the future' I read on the bumper sticker on the car in front of us (fig. 2.4), another ICGC slogan. I greet them and get down at the Christ Temple (fig. 2.3), the prestigious headquarters of 'the teacher of the nation.'

As do most charismatic churches, the International Central Gospel Church leans heavily on the personality, vision, and charisma of its founder and leader, Rev. Dr. Mensa Anamua Otabil. Otabil is not only the founder and leader, or 'general overseer'; he is the public face, the embodiment of the church. In daily speech the general public often uses Otabil and 'Central' almost interchangeably. Most ICGC members also first encountered the church through Otabil's media ministry and public appearance. This chapter deals with pastor Mensa Otabil as a public personality. His regular TV appearance in his slick *Living Word* broadcast has made him a celebrity with fans such as Linda and Emmanuel. Every week he receives hundreds of letters and e-mails, fan mail from people in all kinds of churches and of all kinds of religious convictions,

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Fig. 2.1 Painted portrait of Otabil on display at Oman Art workshop in Dansoman, Accra.

Fig. 2.3 Christ Temple, headquarters of the International Central Gospel Church.



Fig. 2.2 Official portrait of Mensa Otabil (photo: AltarMedia).



2. Mensa Otabil

telling him how his programme has blessed them. This clearly indicates his success, but it also points to his predicament in being both a pastor of a church congregation and a religious celebrity with fans at the same time. This produces a central tension in his strategies of managing his personality.

One important characteristic common to Ghana's charismatic churches is their emphasis on success, understood in terms of thisworldly, material wealth, physical well-being, and social status (cf. Gifford 2004). The focus is on becoming a new, 'born-again' person and on the power of the Holy Spirit that enables one to achieve victory and success in all areas of life. Contrary to the Catholic tradition, charismatic churches advocate a 'direct,' personal relationship with Jesus Christ and an 'immediate' access to the power of the Holy Spirit, that is, unmediated by ordained priests, sacralised church buildings or elaborate ritual. In Ghana, this means that they also strongly oppose religious specialists such as traditional shrine priests, Islamic Mallams, or spiritualist prophet-healers, who equally function as indispensable intermediaries between their clients and the supernatural realm (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2003). Instead, they claim to offer their followers a way of personally receiving the spiritual power needed to live a successful life and fight malevolent powers: without recourse to traditional, and thus 'demonic' remedies, but with a deep personal bond with Jesus Christ. Despite this theological emphasis, however, Ghanaian charismatic Pentecostalism increasingly emphasises the role of the supernaturally gifted, or 'anointed,' 'Man of God' in overcoming problems and achieving success.¹ A shift that Paul Gifford recognises as 'a certain resacramentalisation reversing the Reformation' (2004:61), but that also stands in continuity with African traditional religious practice. Much like an African shrine priest, this 'Man of God' becomes a medium through which his followers can, with specific rituals of interaction, get access to the power of the Holy Spirit in order to gain wealth, health, and greatness.

These new mediators of success vary greatly in their ways of operating and attracting people, that is, in their modes of communicating and transferring this spiritual power to their followers. Ghanaian charismatics usually distinguish between 'miracle-oriented' and 'message-oriented' pastors, and for that matter, churches. Gifford (2004) speaks of a spectrum with at one end those, such as Bishop Agyin Asare or Prophet Salifu, who perform miraculous healing and deliverance from demonic forces. At the other end are those known for their 'profound teaching,' with Otabil as the great example. His recurring emphasis on education, his self-presentation as a teacher, and his messages' appeal to the ratio, do not imply, however, that spirituality is of no concern. It only implies that spiritual power is expressed and transmitted through specific ways. For Otabil, his message is the channel that allows the Holy Spirit to bless, and especially to transform people in order to be successful in life. The power of both message-oriented and miracle-oriented pastors is closely intertwined with their public personalities. As much as Otabil may differ from other charismatic preachers, he certainly is a charismatic figure. He seems to have a kind of natural authority based mainly on charisma as a natural, or rather supernatural, quality, a gift. In a much more explicit way than the power of African shrine priests, the charisma or perceived supernatural power of 'Men of God' like Otabil, and hence its transmission, thrives to a large extent on marketing strategies, personality creation,

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and on style and celebrity.² It is quite striking how Otabil seems able to reproduce his charisma on a continually increasing scale. The mass reproduction of charisma risks undermining people's belief in its supernatural origin and thus has its limit. Otabil appears to escape this risk, but he is aware of the pitfalls of mass mediating charisma. This chapter seeks to understand Otabil's charisma in the context of religious media marketing.

'Charisma' (or the plural 'charismata') is a central theological notion in charismatic-Pentecostal doctrine and discourse and refers to the extraordinary gifts given by the Holy Spirit to individual Christians for the good of others, such as healing, tongues speaking, prophecy, and miracles.³ In the theological sense, charisma belongs to the realm of the supernatural, the mystical. It is something that you cannot choose, learn, earn, or produce. Neither can you acquire it through the mediation of the church. You can only receive it directly from the Holy Spirit. Charisma, in this sense, is beyond human agency.

This theological understanding of charisma has come to interfere with the sociological understanding of it. Max Weber, whose name has become inseparable from the notion of charisma, built his theory of charisma (1978 [1922]) on a long tradition of theological thinking about the difference between the institutionalised and the free, 'spiritual' aspects of Christianity (Fabian 1971:4; see also Poloma 1989, 2005).⁴ Weber described charisma as a type of authority based not on traditional, inherited power, nor on rational-bureaucratic power, but on an *extraordinary* personal quality (Weber 1978:241), on a special gift of grace. These exceptional qualities are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary (Ibid.), hence they cannot be 'learned' or taught, only 'awakened' or 'tested' (Ibid.:249). While many of his formulations echo the theological understanding of charisma as a supernatural gift of power, for the sociologist Weber, charisma can only exist in the relationship between the charismatic character and his adoring followers. Weber's more precise, but often overlooked (e.g. Csordas 1997), relational definition of charisma as the *perception* of supernatural giftedness among followers of a charismatic leader, then, does leave room for human agency: perception can be influenced or manipulated with strategic representation. Hence, I suggest, charisma lies in the capacity of a leader to successfully project an image of himself as an extraordinary leader, or, in Pentecostal terms, an 'anointed Man of God.' Media can be effective tools for such self-representation. But in order for people to perceive the person represented as indeed a 'Man of God' and not as 'merely' a man of media, that is as embodying God's immediate presence (through spiritual gifts) and not as a media production, the work of representation has to erase itself.

The notion of charisma helps us to capture the intrinsic relationship between religion and media set out in the introduction and the fundamental instability of religious mediation. Denoting the gift of authority, the power to capture people's attention, to evoke devotion, to make believe, to captivate, and to enchant, charisma operates at the interface between the technological and the religious. Media technologies like television or film can make things and persons more beautiful and attractive than they really are, while at the same time presenting them as true and accessible. They give them a mystical kind of authority that makes people desire or follow them.

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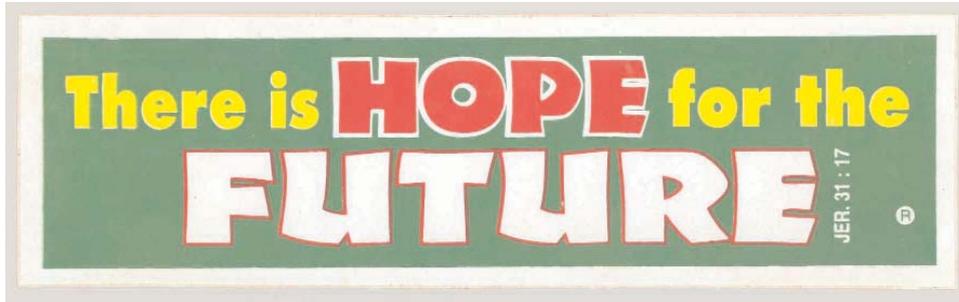


Fig. 2.4 ICGC bumper sticker.

Modern Ghanaian pastors have and cultivate this kind of charisma. It characterises the leadership style of their churches and the mediatised personality cults around them. But in this charismatic quality of mass media also lies the challenge of authenticating charismatic authority, that is, of convincing media audiences that the extraordinary quality of these mass media pastors exists beyond media representation. In other words, that what is shown is really divine anointing and not media fabrication.

The success (or failure) of Ghanaian charismatic pastors seems to depend on the extent to which they are able to hold the two seemingly incompatible impulses of embodied charisma and media representation in a productive tension (cf. Wacker 2001). In view of Weber's description of charisma as 'foreign to economic considerations' (Weber 1978:244) and 'a typical anti-economic force' (Ibid.:245), their blend of divine authority and strategic entrepreneurship seems paradoxical. In the case of charismatic Pentecostalism, however, charisma appears to thrive exactly on churches' effective ways of 'selling God' (Moore 1994) and his earthly representatives. Interestingly, in the Ghanaian context this kind of charisma resonates with that of traditional shrine priests and healers, whose perceived spiritual power can neither be separated from their entrepreneurial concerns with attracting clients (chapter 6). Modern marketing techniques and flashy media styles, however, distinguish the charisma of church pastors from that of shrine priests. At the same time, they also pose a major challenge, as the inherent contradiction in this process of marketing and mass mediating charisma is that economic strategies and media production imply certain 'formats.' In the introduction I identified the tension between 'format' and 'flow,' or, to be more precise, between an awareness of the mediating power of format and a sense of immediate flow of spirit power, as fundamental to the problem of mediation. The question that runs through this and the two following chapters is how the structuring force of 'format' relates to 'charisma.' This chapter on Otabil examines strategies of branding, chapter 3 on his church deals with the question of ritual and routinisation, and chapter 4 on his media ministry with television formats.

Without denying that part of Otabil's charisma stems from an inborn flair, God-given if you wish, I argue in this chapter that it is for a large part constituted by conscious self-presentation, PR strategies, stage performance, and protocol. Bringing together religion, national politics, business, entertainment, and spiritual transformation in his preaching and performance, Otabil creates himself as the embodiment of his message, carefully managing his public image and charisma and styling his body,

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Fig. 2.5 Part of a flyer advertising the ICGC Greater Works conference 2002

voice, and performance. Dealing with the figure of Otabil and his teaching, this chapter looks at the marketing of charisma with a distinctive style and a distinctive message. The first part looks at the creation of Otabil as a public personality through careful PR-strategies that 'market' him not just as a Man of God, but as a different kind of Man of God.⁵ The second part examines his main trademark and 'channel of blessing,' his 'life transforming messages.' This chapter thus examines the constitution of religious authority through the convergence of charisma and marketing techniques. It also points to the fragility of this convergence: while format produces charisma, it threatens to undermine it at the same time. This is a challenge religious media celebrities like Otabil have to meet.

Dr. Mensa Otabil: the making of a charismatic figure

Mensa Otabil is often seen as an exception in the wide and still expanding field of charismatic preachers. Public opinion in Ghana is not always favourable about the charismatic explosion, but newspaper editorials, radio panellists and 'the man in the street' often praise Otabil for his vision and set him apart from the numerous self-proclaimed, money-greedy 'men of God' who indulge in all kinds of immoral practices. The *Chronicle* editorial of Wednesday, 16 July 2003, for example, headed 'Otabil's vision must be taken seriously' is an outright praise song:⁶

The ICGC founder has, over the years, proved himself not only to be a worthy teacher, but a pan-Africanist in his own right whose messages are largely geared towards the raising of new and effective leaders for a sustainable development of Africa and its people. Topics he treats on radio, television, at camp meetings, seminars and regular church services show him as a positive revolutionary. And it is remarkable that, contrary to the general conditions in the country, Rev. Otabil who heads a latter day, charismatic church has come to be accepted, respected and considered opinion leader by not only Charismatics

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and Pentecostals, but even the Orthodox faithful and the old intelligentsia who would normally have nothing to do with 'mushroom' churches. Otabil's credibility and respectability which have earned him a place among intellectuals and national leaders are themselves issues of good lessons for all to take.

Otabil has also attracted quite some academic attention and scholars similarly portray him as not representative of charismatic Pentecostalism in Ghana. Paul Gifford devotes a whole chapter to Otabil in his recent book on Ghana's new Christianity and singles him out as the one charismatic figure with a structural focus on social awareness, and thus as an exception to his doubts about charismatic Christianity's ability to foster socio-political change (2004:197). This echoes his earlier exemption of Otabil from his view of charismatic churches as being easily co-opted by the government (1998:11). The Ghanaian theologian Emmanuel Larbi, who also devotes a chapter to Otabil, writes that 'the distinctiveness of Otabil's theology [...] seems to set him aside from all other neo-Pentecostal preachers in the country (2001:348).

Behind this public and academic image of Otabil, however, is a strategic mode of representation, almost in a marketing fashion. In the face of harsh competition in the field of religion today, Otabil consciously wants to present himself as different from all the others, as special, as more distinguished and sophisticated and he has over the years developed certain 'trademarks,' of which his 'distinctive theology' is only one, closely tied to his distinctive style. Instead of painting a portrait of Otabil, then, this section analyses the portrait of Otabil as it is painted by himself and his PR team. This portrait results from a careful balance of concealing and revealing vis-à-vis the church membership, the outside public, and also the researcher. What does not fit the image he wants to put forward is not brought in the media and not publicly spoken about.

Self-presentation

Two things strike the eye and the ear about Otabil's self-presentation in relation to other charismatic pastors in Ghana: his name and his dress. In contrast to other big names of the charismatic scene, such as Nicholas Duncan-Williams, Charles Agyin-Asare, Dag Heward-Mills, and Sam Korankye-Ankrah, Otabil does not use any English name. This is significant in Ghana, where almost everybody has an English, 'Christian' name and not using it is a conscious choice. For Otabil 'name is just a PR' in that it doesn't determine your behaviour, but is a very public sign about yourself. He used to have an English name – which one is a well-kept secret – but he decided to drop it, as he told me,

when I started becoming very much aware that I don't need to be a European. I can use my African name and I can go anywhere. Kofi Annan is Kofi Annan, he is not called William Annan.⁷

His four children have all-African names as well: Sompa, Nhyira, Yoofi Abotare, and Baaba Aseda.

In accordance with his African name, Otabil is publicly known for his African

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Fig. 2.6 Photo of Otabil (right) participating in the ICGC Life Walk published on the back page of the Daily Graphic of 15 March 2005 (photo: Daily Graphic).

Nigerian style of dress typical of Yoruba royalty, the *agbada* (see Renne 2004) has become fashion for 'big men' in Ghana too. The loose, ankle-length, richly embroidered robe, worn over a tunic and pants, has large, flowing sleeves that can be draped over the shoulders or left loose. The modern type is usually made of imported materials, mostly lace or brocade fabrics. Due to the large amount of material and the laborious embroidery, it is generally very expensive and, just like in pre-colonial Nigeria, a marker of social distinction. Otabil appears in another one almost every week. With his African name and his African dress, then, Otabil is the embodiment of the African consciousness and confidence that he preaches. The lavishness of his outfit and lifestyle (including posh cars and mansions, frequent business class travel, classy office furniture, and high-tech equipment), moreover, testifies to the possibility of Africans being as successful (read: rich) as westerners. There is a contradiction, however, in this charismatic style of showing off wealth and success. On the one hand, such styles visualise spiritual blessing and thus serve to authenticate claims to being 'anointed.' At the same time, however, they risk to invoke the criticism of exploiting poor people for self-enrichment. As pointed out in the previous chapter, the most common complaint about charismatic pastors is that they are greedy opportunists, who mislead 'the people' with false claims only to get rich quickly and lead extravagant lifestyles. Despite his generally favourable public opinion, Otabil is not immune to such criticism. In 1989 he got himself talked about in the media when his congregation gave him a Mercedes-Benz for his birthday. A reporter of *The Mirror* asked him why a more modest car was not chosen. Otabil answered:

The Benz ... serves as the *amplification of the personality of the pastor* because the pastor does not just occupy a spiritual position. He is a source of inspiration to the people he meets who do not relate to him as a pastor but relate to him on a certain level. So if the church grows to a certain social standing and wants the pastor to be able to meet people that he comes across with that kind of dignity then I think buying a Mercedes-Benz car is nothing of a big deal.⁹

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In Otabil's view, driving (or rather being driven in) an expensive car is essential as personal PR in the world of business chief executives and government leaders.

In addition, his corpulent body, as for most African 'big men,' is a clear symbol of success, the visible evidence of wealth, or in Christian discourse of divine blessing. But what struck me when I revisited Otabil in 2005, was his sudden and publicised concern with loosing weight. Not only had he visibly lost a considerable amount of fat, he also eagerly talked about this in his sermons. The *Daily Graphic* published a picture of a profusely sweating Otabil in T-shirt among the crowd participating in the ICGC Life Walk (see chapter 3) on the back page (fig. 2.6). At first sight I thought that he would not be pleased with this, as it contrasts starkly with the images of class, distinction, and Africanness that he circulates. It supports, however, his efforts to portray himself as a man of the people, and moreover, as somebody who is so confident about his own greatness that he does not need a fat body in order to be seen as successful. Despite protests from fellow pastors and friends (as he told me), his new body strategy is to portray himself as standing above this common African concern and participating in the global health trend.

PR strategies

One of the tasks of AltarMedia, the church's media department to which chapter 4 will be devoted, is to take care of Otabil's public relations, that is, to distribute and guard outgoing information on and photographs of Otabil. This involves, first, the production and updating of a biographical text, that is used on the ICGC website,¹⁰ on church products such as video tapes and books, and that is sent to churches and organisers of conferences or other platforms where Otabil is invited to speak. One of the bionote versions currently circulating reads as follows:

The general overseer Mensa Otabil is a respected Christian statesman, educator, entrepreneur and an international motivational speaker. He oversees the multi-faceted network of ministries of the international Central Gospel Church with its headquarters in Accra, Ghana and serves as Senior Pastor of Christ Temple. His over-riding passion is to see the timeless principles of the Bible made applicable to the renewal and transformation of Africa. His messages speak to the pertinent issues of a continent and a people seeking solutions to their perplexing challenges. Dr. Otabil is Chancellor of Ghana's premier private university – Central University College. He also serves on several Boards and Trusts of organizations committed to human upliftment and presents the inspirational radio and television broadcast – The Living Word. Rev. Otabil is a devoted husband to his wife Joy and a father to their four children – Sompa, Nhyira, Yoofi and Baaba.

The title 'general overseer' is commonly used in charismatic-Pentecostal churches, both in the US and in Ghana, for the highest leader. It places him above everything and everyone and grants him the authority of an all-seeing eye, thus liking him to God. The title suggests that he oversees the entire network of over hundred ICGC

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Fig. 2.7 Official portrait of Mensa Otabil by AltarMedia.

churches in Ghana and abroad, but in practice he exerts very little control over other branches, especially those far away, and acts primarily as the head pastor of the headquarters, the Christ Temple. The qualification 'Christian statesmen' clearly refers to his political engagement, his membership of the National Commission on Culture and of various civil society boards and trusts.¹¹ Otabil earned his credits as an 'educator' not only by 'teaching to the nation,' but especially by having founded a university, the Central University College.¹² Otabil has little formal education himself and is almost entirely autodidact. He earned his honorary doctorate title from a university in England, but he is reluctant to talk about this. All the more noise is made about his establishment of the first private university in Ghana.

Despite the common critique of charismatic preachers being clever businessmen, Otabil is officially PR-ed as an 'entrepreneur.' This materialises not only in his running the church as a business organisation; in 2003 he established his own consultancy company, Otabil and Associates (in another version of the text 'entrepreneur' is changed into 'consultant'). He has serious plans of establishing a church-linked bank.¹³

By labelling Otabil an 'international motivational speaker' AltarMedia appropriates the globalised genre of motivational speaking, an increasingly popular genre, especially in the US. In 1999 Otabil won the Millennium Excellence Award in Ghana as the Best Motivational Speaker, a fact that was advertised in an older version of the text. Identifying him not just as a motivational speaker, but an international one also, hints at Otabil's international travel and connections, that are publicised in church and in another bionote version. He speaks extensively about his overseas trips, about what he saw and learnt, the people he met, and thus cultivates an air of a cosmopolitan, a global citizen. At the same time, his African consciousness is stressed as his 'over-riding passion.' It is this part of his message (see below) and his book *Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia* that brought him national and international renown, especially among black communities in the US, and has become his major trademark. Finally, he is portrayed as a family man, that is, a *nuclear family* man: a devoted husband to his wife and father to his children, something he also alludes to in his messages.¹⁴

In contrast to many charismatic pastors, Otabil is thus not presented as a 'miracle worker,' a prophet, a 'powerful healer.' No reference is made to any 'special anointing,' 'spiritual gifts,' or 'supernatural encounter,' – phrases commonly used to 'market' preachers – not even to the Holy Spirit. This is a significant marketing strategy, employed to present Otabil

Fig. 2.8 Official portrait of Mensa Otabil and his wife by AltarMedia.



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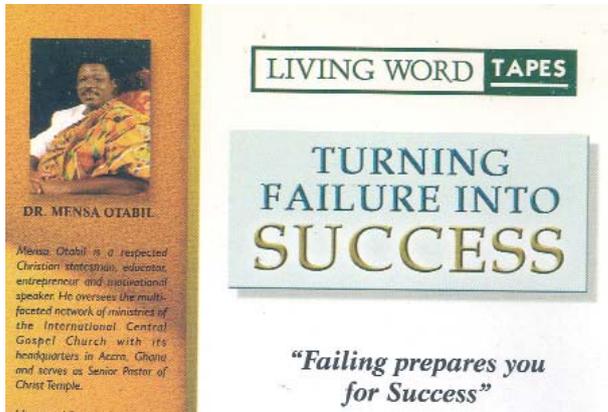


Fig. 2.9 Living Word video cassette jacket.

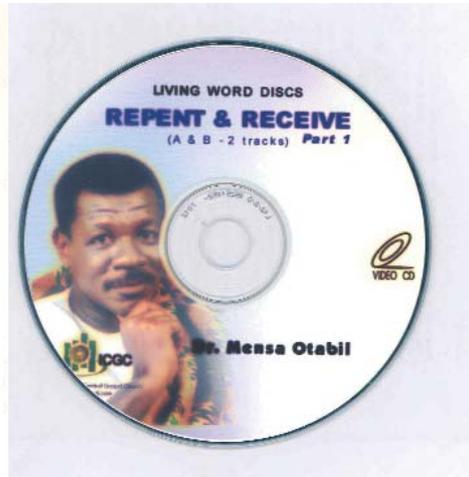


Fig. 2.10 Living Word VCD label.

Fig. 2.11 ICGC bookmark 2002.



Fig. 2.12 ICGC bookmark 2005.



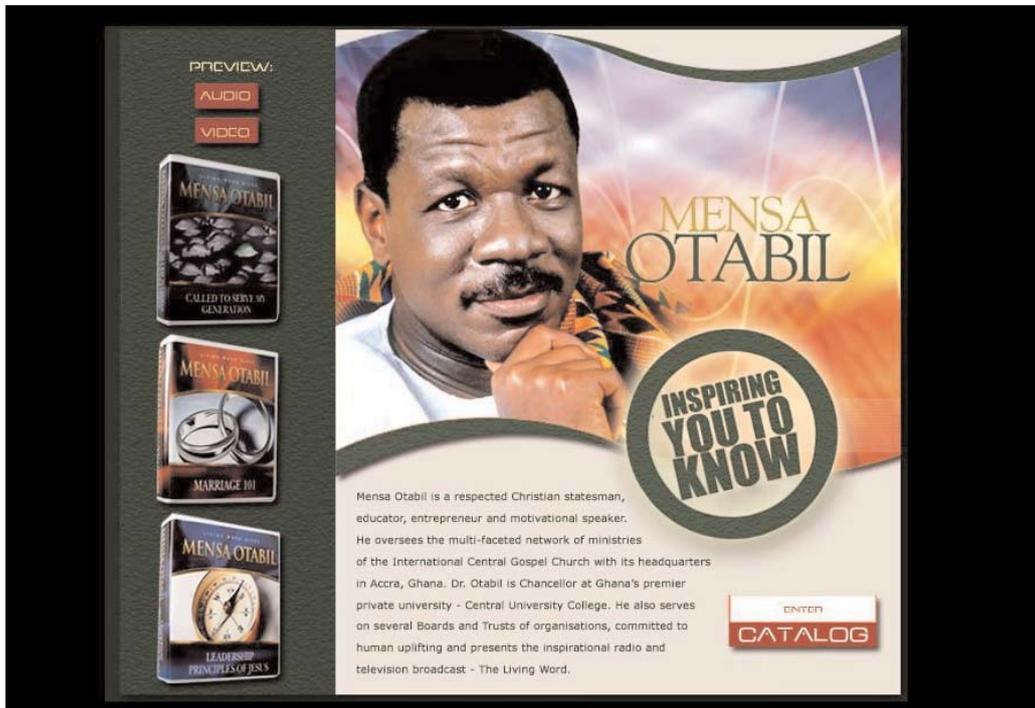
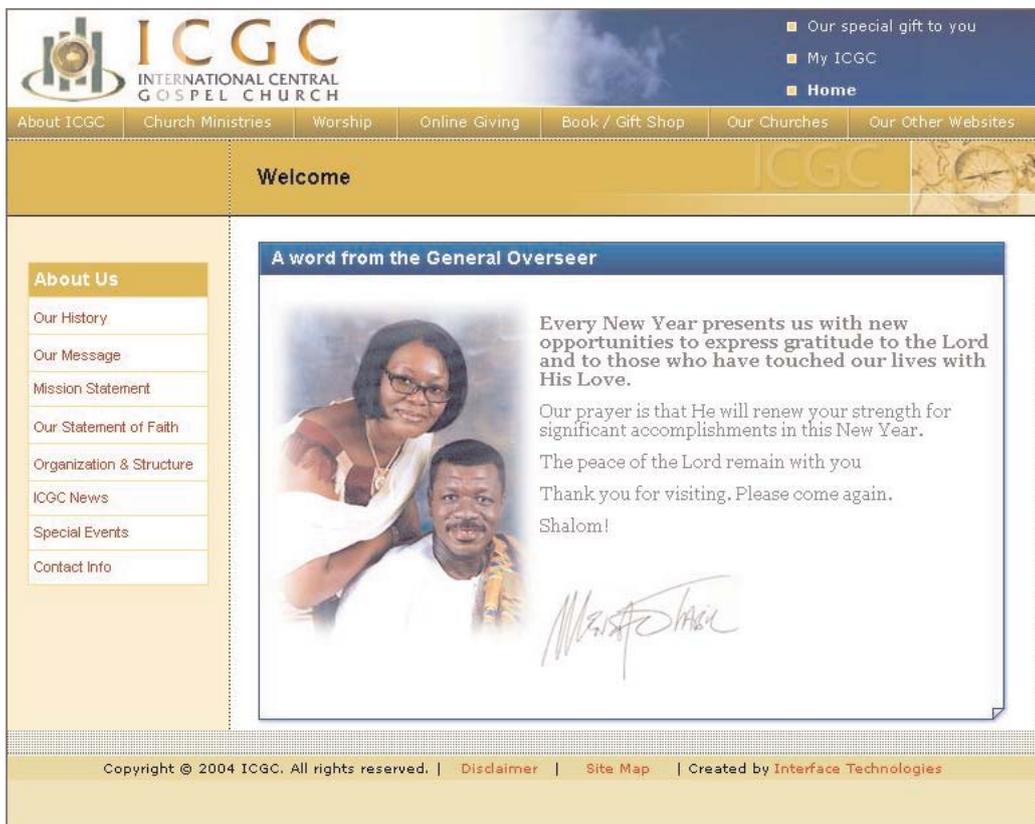


Fig. 2.13 AltarMedia website (2006).

Fig. 2.14 Website of the International Central Gospel Church.



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as unique, different from all the others, and above all, more distinguished and sophisticated. It is closely linked to his 'rationalist,' 'anti-spiritualist' message.

Secondly, the public relations department takes care of the photographs of Otabil that are put into circulation (figs. 2.2, 2.7, 2.8). On the official portraits, he wears *kente*, an expensive woven cloth associated with Asante royalty and globally with African greatness and pride. He does not wear it the traditional way, however, with one shoulder bare, but with a white shirt under it, like Nkrumah did. He sits on a luxurious Victorian armchair, at which the picture hints by showing just a corner of the back. These pictures portray Otabil as a confident, successful African, a thinker, a controlled and respectable person, a rich man of class and distinction, but also friendly and open, supported by his loving wife. The image of a father-like figure, warm, caring, willing to listen to everybody's problem, is reinforced by the format of his media programme *Living Word* (chapter 4), but contrasts sharply with his inaccessibility and his authoritarian rule.

These official portraits are replicated in many media formats associated with the ICGC, sometimes in combination with the above biographical text: on the back cover of Otabil's recent book, as jacket image for video cassettes (fig. 2.9), as CD label (fig. 2.10), on bookmarks (figs. 2.11, 2.12), on ICGC websites (figs. 2.13, 2.14), and on websites of overseas churches that host Otabil as a visiting speaker. As a result it reappears as a painted portrait in a roadside art workshop. More than just representing Otabil, the image functions as an icon and a logo at the same time.¹⁵ As an icon, it condenses and embodies Otabil's theology and the divine anointing upon his person and his ministry. It enacts the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives by visualising its blessings as riches and success. As a logo it serves as an instant visual cue to the quality and uniqueness of the ICGC and its main 'product,' Otabil's 'life transforming' teaching.

Thirdly, apart from biosnotes and photographs, PR also involves the circulation of motivational and inspirational 'power quotes' by Otabil. Following this widespread practice among charismatic preachers and business innovators and leaders, especially in the US, AltarMedia has recently started to select pithy one-liners from Otabil's sermons and circulate them through the church's website and other channels. To give one example: 'All problems have a life cycle and an expiring date. Keep your perspectives right.' The lay-out of Otabil's most recent book *Buy the Future* also makes selected statements on each page instantly recognisable as 'quotable.' Such emphasis on 'quotability' establishes Otabil as an intellectual, a teacher, and places him among the great thinkers of world history, whose pronouncements have also been included in a global 'quote bank.' It raises him from the Ghanaian level, where many people are occupied with the spiritual powers that harm them, to the global level where power is instead believed to derive from knowledge.

Stage performance

In discussing Otabil's stage performance, it has to be emphasised that this is not merely in-church, but forms the core of his TV broadcast and thus is addressed to his mass audience as much as to the audience in church. Otabil's performance style is a skilful

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mix of teaching, inspirational preaching, political commentary and entertainment. He makes ample use of story-telling techniques and inserts jokes and anecdotes to entertain his audience and at the same time teach a lesson or illustrate a point. His message seems to flow naturally from his head, while in fact it is meticulously prepared.

Otabil's preaching style is remarkable. With his deep voice and dignified authority he commands respect and attention with calm confidence and clarity, not with shouting. He does raise his voice when he becomes passionate about something, but never does he lose his self-control. He admits that his preaching style is inspired by Kenneth Hagin. In an interview he told me that he used to preach 'just like the mainstream charismatic preachers, screaming and shouting.' Then he once heard Hagin preach, slow and relaxed, and he thought 'that is how I would like to preach' and he started changing his style.¹⁶

Otabil's use of the stage is also unlike 'the mainstream charismatic preachers.' The stage is sober, not full of artificial plants and flowers, banners or other decorations. Only two plants flank the stage. Otabil alone fills the wide stage with his flamboyant presence and large, flowing *agbada*. He uses the wooden pulpit in the centre for his sermon notes, but includes the whole stage in his performance, walking up and down and underlining his statements with his whole body. Not in the agitated manner of many of his colleagues though; like his speaking, Otabil's body movements are always controlled and dignified. Never also does Otabil descend the stage-wide steps to walk among the audience, address individuals or touch them, as is common practice in many churches. He always remains a level higher and avoids direct eye contact even with people he knows. He thus enacts his authority and maintains a strict hierarchy. His use of teaching aids, first a white board, later a roll-down screen with a Power Point projection of his message outline, underscores his role as a teacher rather than a preacher.

Yet, despite this performance of authority and despite the mass of people in the audience, Otabil skilfully creates a relaxed atmosphere of sharing, of having fun together, of intimacy almost. This image is reconfirmed by the visual introduction to the *Living Word* broadcast, which shows a group of young men laughing out loud and slapping their thighs during a service. As a professional entertainer, Otabil places the right jokes at exactly the right moments and mass laughter is indeed not exceptional during sermons. He is not afraid of making jokes about himself. Preaching against taking advice of immoral people, he told his audience 'you are all born-again, but your pastors, do you know what they do in darkness? That Otabil there, do you know... have you gone to his bedroom? He's a human being ooo!' The fun was as much in the content as in the typically Ghanaian way of speaking he accentuated. Moreover, he hinted at the frequent tabloid publications about the immoral behaviour of self-proclaimed 'men of God.' Indeed, most of his jokes are about Ghanaian situations or habits clearly recognised as 'typical' by the audience or resonating with widespread rumours and beliefs. The interaction between men and their (multiple) girlfriends is a frequent and always successful subject. In 'The portrait of success' he made fun of men, Amega, Fosu, Asamoah, Lartey... , paying all kinds of bills for all kinds of girlfriends: 'you men do not have girlfriends, you are income leisure.' The male names he used are not coincidental, but are 'typical' in Ewe, Fanti, Asante, and

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Ga respectively. Often this kind of humour takes the form of ridicule. Talking about 'fetishism' in 'Pulling down strongholds,' he ridiculed the Ghanaian way of 'jujuing our way to power.'

A man wants his wife to love him. Instead of being nice, being romantic, talking nicely to his wife – sweetheart, how are you? – and just spending time with his wife, no, he won't do that. He goes to the juju man to give him a certain potion to put under the wife's pillow so that the wife will love him. Women who want their men to love them, instead of changing their character, change their fetish!

Indeed, the connection between 'power' and 'juju' is widespread in Ghanaian popular thinking and this does not exclude the power of charismatic pastors. Their visual styles that highlight 'financial and material blessing,' then, risk to resonate with beliefs and stories about the immorality of wealth, that is, about getting rich through 'juju' rituals, and specifically about pastors' consultations with 'juju' shrines. The fame of powerful pastors may easily turn into infamy. By ridiculing such popular beliefs, Otabil attempts to trivialise them and to immunise himself against such accusations.

Finally, Otabil often tells anecdotes about himself, in a way that turns out to be a recycling of the same kind of stories. How, as a little boy, he would go and rescue white expat children's toys from the trash to play with them. Or how he was refused ('by a Blackman!') to enter a hotel with his father because he was wearing bathroom slippers, while white children wearing the same slippers were allowed in. Or how, when he started preaching, he was dressed in a simple shirt and simple trousers with simple shoes, while all others wore three-piece suits. 'Then my friend said 'I like your simplicity,' but what I wore was what I had. In all my life I have never owed anybody before' (Teaching service 2 April 2002).' This is clearly a Ghanaian version of the American 'from rags to riches' dream. It doesn't matter where or what or how miserable you are, you can become as successful (and rich) as I am. Such stories create an impression of openness and intimacy, but they don't actually reveal much about his private life. Significantly, he also does not present the so common conversion narrative of how bad and immoral he was in the past, how he went through a deep crisis, how Jesus then saved him and how successful he became afterwards. Again a way of saying 'I am different from all the others.'

Office space and protocol

The publicity of Otabil's on-stage presentation is reinforced by off-stage seclusion, especially the seclusion of his private office. Otabil's office is constituted as a 'sacred space,' separated from the rest of the world by boundaries that are carefully guarded and can only be crossed by a select few who have gone through the necessary ritual of protocol. Otabil's status as a 'big man' and his authoritarian leadership and patrimonialism (see also Gifford 2004:185-87) thrives on social and spatial distance.¹⁷ Social distance is carefully guarded by Anna, Otabil's secretary, deacon Eric, the protocol officer, and the lady at the reception downstairs. Spatial distance is emphasised by the

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Fig. 2.15 Christ Temple office decorations.

architecture and decoration of the office building in the Christ Temple. Meeting 'Doc' is subjected to protocol and requires time, passing through different spaces, and intermediaries. First you have to see the receptionist and wait in the reception hall while she calls Anna upstairs. When Anna calls back after a while, you can pass through the clean tiled staircase decorated with plastic plants and a shiny, wood-carved eagle (referring to one of Otabil's messages, 'Come fly with the eagles'). The smoothness of the wooden handrail leads you to the first floor, where the lower pastors' offices, the administration, and the accounts office (and previously also the media studio) are. The leather couch and the cold mineral water dispenser in the waiting area, and the coolness of the air-conditioning all contribute to the experience of being in a special place, of being a privileged person. The next stairs lead to the top floor, with Otabil's office and that of his deputy pastor Edwin Donkor. The waiting area was just renovated in 2005 and is now decorated with 'African' paintings and sculptures (fig. 2.15), an elegant side table with a dried flower bouquet and a mirror, in Ghana obviously an upper class style of home decoration. Pass through another heavy, wooden door and you reach Anna, the last gate keeper. Most likely, you will have to book an appointment with her, after explaining what you want to see Otabil about and her judging that this cannot be dealt with by another pastor, and come back another time, usually on a Wednesday afternoon, Doc's time slot for appointments. But even with an officially scheduled time, prepare to wait a long time; one way of asserting status is having people wait for you. Moreover, once you are in, Otabil does take his time to wrap you in his charismatic presence.

For many people the experience of entering and actually spending some time in Otabil's office (fig. 2.16), can indeed be a humbling one. The splendour of the Victorian style furniture, the decorations, and the latest computer equipment complement the for Accra residents rather exceptional experience of being in a sound-proof space, of not hearing any sounds from outside the office, only the humming of the air-conditioning, a soft classical music playing in the background (another marker of distinction), and Otabil's deep voice. The space of his office and the process of entering

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Fig. 2.16 Mensa Otabil posing in his office.

that space inform Otabil's charisma and imbue him with a kind of 'sacredness' that colours the experience of being physically close to this 'great man of God.'

Otabil's charisma thrives to a large extent on his public personality as it is constituted by particular styles of presentation and representation. I argue that the key to Otabil's strategy of representation is distinction. Not only does he successfully distinguish himself from the numerous other charismatic men of God, also does his style (of dress, speaking, moving, stage performance, office decoration and furniture, music and art preference) mark a class distinction (Bourdieu 1979). Reading Tamar Gordon and Mary Hancock's argument on 'branding charisma' (2005), I would argue that in the context of Ghana's religious marketplace where men of God increasingly compete for followers, this class distinction converges with what in marketing theory would be called brand distinction.¹⁸ Otabil's marketing strategies entail body, image, text, performance, voice, and space, merging together in a distinctive style that brands Otabil's charisma. Otabil's style, however, cannot be separated from his message. Indeed, his style is his message (Gifford 2004), as much as his message is part of his style. By adopting a particular style he embodies his message and at the same time, his message has become his major trademark, setting him apart from his colleagues, and is just as carefully managed to fit the image of distinction.

A brand of Black consciousness

Otabil differs from many other charismatics in his special commitment to the mental liberation of black people in the world, to true independence, freedom, and self-esteem. Indeed, as Allen Anderson writes, 'Otabil has become particularly well-

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known for his brand of Black consciousness propagated in his writings and preachings that takes him to different parts of Africa' (2002:174). Gifford similarly observes that 'Otabil's attempt to re-evaluate the role and worth of Blacks strikes chords wherever he preaches across the continent' (1994:249). Larbi (2001:348) has termed Otabil's thinking Evangelical-Pentecostal Liberation Theology. This thinking on African selfhood and emancipation, influenced by the writings of the Senegalese presidents Leopold Senghor and Abdou Diouf, started as a series of teachings in the early nineties: 'The inheritance of the Blackman' (two parts), and 'Ethiopia shall soon lift up her hands.' But it is especially his book *Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia: A biblical revelation on God's purpose for the Black Race* (1992) (fig. 2.17), that has brought him international fame, both in Africa and among black Christians in the US. It deals with 'God's purpose for the Black race' by revealing 'the role and exploits of Blacks in the Bible that have been either omitted or treated lightly by European and Euro-American scholars' (back cover).

Otabil starts out by stating that 'the spirit of racism still thrives on misinformation and stereotyping' (ibid.:2), especially in the media, 'the most potent force for either the control or the liberation of a people' (ibid.).

The images we see on TV screens are constantly influencing our attitudes either for good or for evil. As a Blackman, I have observed this war being waged from all fronts to portray our people in a very negative light (ibid.:3).

Recounting his experience of watching the movie *The Wild Geese*,¹⁹ he explains his enthusiasm in watching the European butcher the African as

the brutal effects of self-negation and alienation that has plagued Africans and people of African descent over the years. As liberated as I thought I was, the effects of that movie brought into sharp focus the subtle and subliminal attempt to condition my mind to accept as normal the supremacy of one race over the other (ibid.:4).

Beyond the Rivers is an attempt to make the bible counteract this black inferiority complex that was caused by the African past of slavery and colonialism, separation and segregation. As a result of that inferiority complex 'political independence has not brought us mental independence' (ibid.:70).

We now find ourselves in a situation I describe as "bondage in freedom". The most difficult part to break in any situation of addiction and dependency is not the physical but the mental, so then mental slavery is more difficult to break than physical slavery. The minds of our people are so hooked on to the supply and superiority of the white skin that it is almost impossible to conceive the thought of standing on their own feet. Whenever they attempt to stand they would still want to hold the hands of the "old-master". With that attitude, no economic policy will take root and function (ibid.:69-70).

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The key of Otabil's plea for African emancipation, then, is that there can be no socio-economic improvement without liberation of the African mind. 'We have to break these mental barriers to development' (ibid.:72).

For Otabil, the bible is the source of this mental liberation. It was misinterpreted, however, and the myth that the black race was cursed was 'used by Satan and his agents to teach a doctrine of superiority and inferiority of races and established hideous governmental systems like apartheid' (ibid.:35). Otabil challenges this myth by arguing that 'Cush ... was the father of the black races of the world; and he was never cursed. Full Stop!' and pointing out the key roles blacks play in the bible. These show God's 'divine purpose' for the black race in connection with his plan of redemption for the salvation of mankind. 'I believe the total liberation of black people will be preceded by a major revival of God's power and glory in the nations' (ibid.:62). For Otabil a historical indication of this black liberation is the fact that the revival of 'the gifts of the spirit in the early 1900's [that] birthed Pentecostalism and Charismaticism [and] which is now changing the complexion of Christianity, was led by William Seymour – a black man!' (ibid.:63). Otabil then concludes that

The Liberator is Jesus the Son of the Living God and when you come to Him, He does not just liberate your spirit, He also liberates your mind and your thinking. He re-defines your history and puts you on a winning path. We need Jesus to liberate us because He is the connection to our true history! (88).

It is clear that Otabil's effort at instilling black pride is closely intertwined with his style of self-presentation discussed in the previous section. He doesn't need a European name and he doesn't need European dress to be someone in the world. As a black man, he can be himself and still be successful on the same level as whites. I will discuss his notion of Africanness in greater detail below. Here it suffices to say that his version of African consciousness has become a major 'trademark' of Otabil's Christianity, both in Africa and in the United States. It is what people recognise as his unique 'brand,' what distinguishes him from other preachers. He cleverly makes use

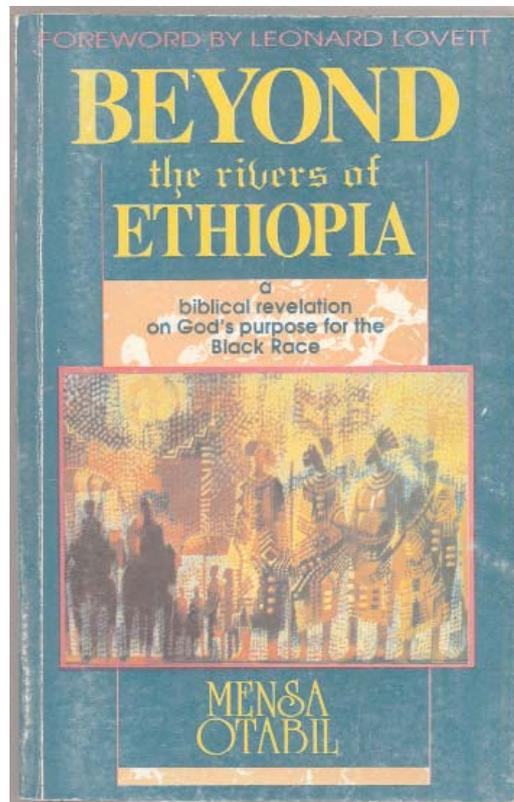


Fig. 2.17 Front cover of Otabil's book *Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia* (1992).

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of that image when he travels abroad. His current emphasis, however, has somewhat shifted away from an exclusive focus on 'the Black race.' There is nothing about 'Africa' or 'Black people' on the church's new website, for example, and the name of the 'Pan-African Believers' Summit' was changed into 'Destiny Summit.' In an interview Otabil told me that

I used to focus only on the value of being African and our uniqueness; that was my only focus. That's where I started. I have realised over time that there is another dimension to it and when we keep talking about this we will stay where we are.²⁰

Although Otabil attributes this shift to a development in his thinking, I suspect that it also has to do with the dynamics of the mass mediated religious marketplace. The high volatility of religious audiences imposes a constant need for renewal, as successful formulas risk losing their enchanting quality quickly. As Otabil's brand of Black consciousness has become successful and other pastors start preaching similar messages (thus 'imitating' his 'product'), Otabil needs a new focus in order to remain distinctive. He is still widely known for his African consciousness, however, and the commitment as it was spelt out on the old ICGC website still informs his current teaching.

We trust God to enable us to present to the world the eternal truths of the Bible in a form that is doctrinally sound, spiritually inspired, mentally challenging and socially relevant. The Gospel of Christ should not be seen as passive and escapist for people who are perplexed by the world's problems but an answer to man's real questions. For our commitment to the oppressed peoples of the world who are disproportionately black, our message breaks the shackles of mental slavery and inferiority complex. It builds freedom and self-esteem. It liberates black people from dependency to be truly independent and ultimately live interdependently with other members of the world's society. We believe that although Africa has gratefully benefited from the labor and sacrifice of other nations to bring the Gospel, education and development to its society, it is now time for Africa to raise its own leaders who will responsibly answer to its challenges. Our message should produce such responsible individuals.

'Life transforming messages'

The main medium for producing 'responsible individuals' who will answer to Africa's challenges are Otabil's 'life-transforming messages,' which he preaches in the Christ Temple on Sundays and Tuesdays and which are recorded and circulated through various channels. Otabil, and for that matter the ICGC, is strongly committed to the development of the country, and particularly to education and entrepreneurship. He propagates what he calls practical Christianity and aims at making the bible an effective 'tool for life' for everybody. Core values are independence, human dignity, and

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excellence. Like many charismatic preachers, Otabil usually delivers his messages as a series of teachings built around one topic. Messages preached and broadcast over the past few years include titles like: 'Turning failure into success,' 'Leadership principles of Jesus,' 'The spirit of the overcomer,' 'Opening new pages for your life,' 'Africa must be free,' 'Marriage 101,' 'Positive attitudes for a happy life,' 'Transformation,' 'Talent, work, and profit,' 'How to receive your harvest,' 'Walking in the footsteps of blessing,' 'Getting beyond your limitations,' and 'The portrait of success.'²¹ His teachings address various problems or challenges that Ghanaians experience or that characterise Ghanaian society, offer people practical tools selected from (or rather illustrated by) the bible, and encourage them to use this to overcome this problem and achieve something in life. He treats his topics in an intellectual way, tracing the etymological roots and explaining the various meanings of certain words and concepts, referring to the dictionary almost as often as to the bible. The clarity and wide applicability of his ideas make Otabil very popular among Christians and non-Christians alike and he is widely perceived as 'the teacher of the nation.'

Like most charismatic preachers worldwide, Otabil's focus is on success, achievement, self-development, personal improvement. Likewise, 'transformation' is a central concept in Otabil's sermons, which are marketed and broadcast as 'life-transforming' messages.²² In 2003, prophesied to be 'my year of transformation,' Otabil delivered a message series titled 'Transformation.'²³ In this series Otabil exhorts his listeners 'not to conform to the prevailing standards of our world but be transformed by moving away from the old forms to the new.' He identifies the ways in which forms are created and challenges listeners to go beyond the set forms; values, beliefs, practices and systems that rule the time and place you live in. He teaches that 'without a renewed mind we will conform to a life that is far below our potential,' and advises to be 'willing and obedient to Gods word, mixing it with faith in order to taste the goodness of God in all areas of life.' Now interestingly, as much as Otabil urges people not to conform, but to move beyond set forms, the church moulds people exactly by making them conform to the formats set by the church's leadership and, as I argue, these have become the prevailing standards.

What makes Otabil's teaching on success and transformation unique is his application of these globally shared concepts to the specific African or Ghanaian situation. The central understanding running through most of Otabil's teachings is that transformation and success on a personal level is intimately connected to transformation on a cultural level and on a political level. Responding to a common criticism that he does not address people's personal problems (e.g. visa, husband, children, business, the common subjects in most charismatic churches), he says in 'Pulling down strongholds':

When you talk about the problems of Africa, people will say "well, but you are talking about the big problems, I don't want to hear about Africa's problems, I want to hear about my own problems." What you fail to understand is that your own problems are the reflection of bigger problems.

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Personal transformation

Otabil is a success-preacher as much as any of his charismatic colleagues. But whereas pastors such as Korankye-Ankrah focus on health and wealth through divine intervention, miracles, seed-faith, prayer, in short, through spiritual power, Otabil sees success as individual achievement, self-development, and personal improvement through human power. His preaching presents an intriguing mix of born-again ideology of personal transformation in Christ, African consciousness, and self-development discourse characteristic of management and consultancy literature. His latest book, *Buy the Future: Learning to negotiate for a future better than your present* (2002), based on the biblical story of Esau and Jacob, teaches that 'the future has no power to design itself, but only takes the form and shape of our actions and inactions today.' It thus makes a case for human rather than spiritual agency, for the power of choice rather than fate, for own responsibility in life, both on the level of individual persons and that of nations. The front cover of the book, showing a handshake of a black and a white hand in business suit (fig. 2.18), illustrates not only Otabil's use of business as a

Fig. 2.18 Front cover of Otabil's book *Buy the Future* (2002).



metaphor for living life, but also his message that in the business of life, blacks and whites are equal business partners. His much older book *Four Laws of Productivity: God's foundation for living* (1991) also centres on human resource management rather than spiritual resource management.

This is not to say that spiritual power is not important for Otabil. In 'The portrait of success' (2005), he uses Psalm 1:1-6 to describe five characteristics of a successful or blessed (interestingly he uses the terms interchangeably) person. First, s/he is a stable person, established, deeply rooted, not wishy-washy or double-minded. Secondly, s/he is spiritually nourished, filled with God's Holy Spirit. 'You cannot be successful without a spiritual relationship with God.' Thirdly, s/he is productive in that activities end in result. Fourthly, s/he is healthy and strong and, Otabil says, there is a lot to con-

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trol about health, especially diet and exercise. 'For some people the portrait of success is a big bowl of *fufu* with palm soup and a lot of meat.' And fifthly, s/he is successful in every area of life, whatever s/he does prospers. He goes on to teach how to be a successful person by managing three important areas of life: counsel, which stands for the wisdom and advise you use to guide your life; path, referring to the direction of your life; and seat, the conditions you allow into your life. After a long expose on sinners, ungodly people, and scoffers, he concludes that it is the Word of God that gives us good counsel, guides our path, and seats us in the seat of good success.

Although 'accepting Christ as personal Lord and Saviour,' reading, listening to and obeying God's word, and living a Christ-like life are thus all crucial for personal success, it is not enough and also not Otabil's major emphasis. Indeed, nothing of the book description at the back cover of *Buy the Future* does disclose its Christian orientation. Otabil's focus is rather on action, choice, performance, excellence. Yet, 'every key to success is in the Bible.' In the very popular series 'Turning failure into success' Otabil identifies why people fail in life and, using the analogy with fishing, prescribes six major steps to turn failure into success: know your target, prepare your net, launch out, go into the deep, release your net, catch what you target. Target and results are key words.

Stay focused and be result oriented. Know what your targets are. I believe in results, some people believe in action, but it is not how much you are doing, but how well. To be result oriented is to be focused not only on the processes alone. Whether you are running a business or running a family, show me the results.

Further, he stresses the importance of time planning – 'setting a time helps you to begin, time helps you to measure your progress, and time helps you to finish' – and overcoming barriers. 'Determine what is a barrier for you and cross it [...] When you step out, your enemies will vanish and doors will open for you.' If you follow these principles well,

you can turn any failure into success. You can have victory in any area of your life. I see many people who have so many problems, but everybody can be victorious in any area.

In a similar vein, 'Come fly with the eagles' (2004) discusses the eagle as a symbol of strength and relates its physical attributes to the need to have far reaching vision, sharp focus, strength for flight, speed in your endeavours, ability to catch your target, and take hold of the future. 'This series will inspire you to walk and not faint, run and not be weary, mount up wings as eagles and fly to new heights' (PR text). Titles like 'Principles of prosperity,' 'Talent, work and profit,' 'Living the abundant life,' 'Principles for effective living,' 'Developing the winning attitude' and many others all carry a similar message about the road to personal success: for Otabil this road is paved with is vision, knowledge, wisdom, responsibility, potentiality, productivity, result-mindedness, choice, action, diligence, and neither with the faith gospel of 'name it, claim it, take it,' nor with a fight against ubiquitous demonic powers. This message strikes chords with

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many people. Young, aspiring urbanites, who are increasingly disillusioned by the state's promises of bringing development and well-being, of making Ghana catch up with the rest of the modern world, long for a feeling of participation in a global society of successful Christians that transcends the national mess of poverty, corruption, and unemployment. For them, Otabil's message is very attractive. It empowers them to take their future into their own hands and work to produce their own success, independent of social circumstances, familial restrictions, or governments. Otabil's recurrent repetition of what is essentially the same message, however, also starts to bore people, as I heard some complain, and his message risks getting worn out.

It should be noted here that there is a difference between in-church preaching and 'life-transforming messages,' the teachings selected for public broadcasting. The Christian character of a message is a criterion for selection: only those messages that are not so strongly Christian oriented and address wider issues are selected while those that are 'too Christian' are not. During a *Living Word* recording session where I was present, Otabil expressed his doubt whether a sermon titled 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' was suitable for broadcasting. He thought it was too much geared towards Christians only. It was only broadcast after his media team convinced him that the message was 'very strong' and relevant for all. But some sermons remain in-house and are never broadcast. They focus much more on the mainstream charismatic Pentecostal doctrine of sin, salvation, faith gospel, seed-planting, and divine intervention. Not only are these topics considered not attractive for a wider, non-Christian audience, they also do not fit Otabil's marketing strategies that identify him with a particular distinctive message and rather set him apart from mainstream charismatic Pentecostalism. The next chapter will pay ample attention to this other, publicly hidden side of Otabil and the tension with his public representation. Here I wish to emphasise Otabil's insecurity in walking the tightrope between his fans and his followers, that is, between his broad, cross-religious media audience and his church congregation. This insecurity, as expressed during that shooting session, hardly shows, but informs all of his preaching, performance, and modes of address. Indeed, since his messages reach new audiences through radio and TV he has changed his way of preaching. He told me that when he preaches, he does not talk to the Christian crowd in front of him, but to a single person in his mind, a non-Christian first time visitor to the church, for whom everything he sees and hears is still strange.

Much of what Otabil teaches, then, is not so specifically Christian and hardly differs from business and leadership consultancy discourse, the roots of which he traces to the bible. Indeed, in 2003 Otabil established his own consultancy company, 'Otabil and Associates,' which develops, organises and markets leadership training seminars and workshops, both company tailored (several large banks, Unilever and other multinationals) and public.²⁴ Although the company is Otabil's private business and he keeps it separate from the church,²⁵ there is considerable overlap between his teachings in church and his leadership trainings, which he develops and often carries out himself. In an interview he explained:

I use the same concepts, the same basic ideas, but in a different context, differently packaged. Of course I do not use biblical examples, but rather examples

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from studies, business literature et cetera. Also, as the educational and intellectual level of the audience is higher, it can be more demanding than what I do in church. And then we also have practicals, assignments, and so on. But what I can do is I take a message that I have preached in church and transform it into a training format; I package it according to the audience's needs.²⁶

This stress on format and packaging for specified audiences reveals Otabil's marketing consciousness and is characteristic of charismatic Pentecostalism, especially in connection with its media ministries. Significantly, companies have long been using Otabil's message tapes for staff meetings, morning worship and so on, to inspire their staff to better performance. Otabil and Associates, then, is a financially clever institutionalisation of what was already happening in business practice. And although he has not widely publicised it (possibly for fear of being accused of being a money-grubber, a widely shared perception of charismatic pastors), it is widely known and seen by his admirers as the practical example of the entrepreneurship and excellence he preaches. The theme of success through personal transformation in Christ and the thin line with management consultancy is common to many charismatic preachers worldwide, but Otabil makes it specific to the African or Ghanaian context.

Cultural transformation

The recurring question around which Otabil builds his messages is: 'Why are we in this mess?' His answer is that 'one of the major reasons why Africa is where it is today, is because of old, antiquated, unusable, unworkable traditions. You can talk about structural adjustment. It doesn't really change anything. The real adjustment is cultural understanding adjustment.'²⁷ Similarly, he stated that 'our inability to modify our culture is one of the fundamental causes of our underdevelopment.'²⁸ Culture, then, is an important focus in Otabil's message and he pleads for a radical cultural transformation. At the same time, he is well-known for his African consciousness and his efforts to make people feel proud about their being African. This raises the questions: what is 'African culture'? What is this 'radical transformation'? What does 'being African' entail?²⁹

In March 2005 I had a long interview with Otabil on Africanness and modernity, in which he raised many issues that also appear in his various messages. First of all, Otabil challenged the common distinction between African and foreign.

You see, the world, there is a blurring of cultures all over the world. The headfast west-east, African-Europe, all those duals are crumbling. For example, a lot of Ghanaian children are growing up and their first language is English, it is a reality. Now if we say that English is a foreign language, than what are we saying? English is not a foreign language, not anymore, it is a Ghanaian language. It is the official language, it is the language we conduct business in and for a lot of young Ghanaians it is their first language. Just like Christianity is no longer a foreign religion. For some people, maybe a couple of hundreds of years ago, Christianity was a foreign religion, because they

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had to convert from an African traditional religion at an age of maturity, change their world view to become a Christian. I didn't need to convert, I was born into it. So it is not foreign to me, it is my religion. And those are the things that our society has not come to terms with. That these things that were foreign to some people a couple of hundreds years ago have now become indigenous to us. So if somebody is wearing suit and tie, he is no longer wearing foreign clothes. In fact, for most people putting on the cloth, the *ntoma*, is more foreign. Many functionaries, public people, cannot put on cloth. When they attempt it slips all over. They have all kinds of safety pins holding it. So which one is foreign to them? Is it the cloth or the suit? For those people I think the cloth is foreign.

Otabil's rejection of any clear-cut distinction between what is African and what is European or Western automatically implies a critique on the hegemonic thinking about 'Africanness' as 'tradition,' as past.

A lot of things are changing in the African society. We lived in communities where you interacted with everybody, every elderly person was your uncle or your auntie. But now we have isolated communities, just the father, the mother and the children, living in walled houses, they don't interact with the neighbours very much. Will they be less African? I don't think so, they will still be African. [...] The whole issue of being African and being modern, we haven't seriously confronted that issue. When we define other people we don't define them mostly by their past, we define them by their current status. But anytime Africa is defined it always goes back to the past, deep deep deep ancient. I think we Africans we have defined ourselves that way. When we talk about our culture it is almost always something very very past, remote. The old Pan-Africanist movement idolised everything African, because we were opposing the Europeans, who denigrated our persons or beliefs and culture. So the Pan-Africanist movement reclaimed our Africanness. In itself it was good, it was a reclamation that was to restore dignity, things that were ours. But we also took those things and kept them as ours and the world moved. We modernised with them, but we still kept this African bit behind and anytime we want to be African we have to come back to the past. We can't move with it. That is the contradiction. And it hinders our development agenda. I think Africa's underdevelopment is not because we cannot develop, but we are afraid to develop. Because development is western and we will feel like we are moving away from our being, our Africanness. Because those who defined it for us, defined it only in the past of the ancestors. That is the challenge we are facing. We need new thinkers who can really shake that box. There has to be a conscious effort to determine what we are moving with and what we are leaving behind. But most of our intellectuals were schooled in the old thinking of preservation of our Africanness. So almost every intellectual discourse you hear focuses on preserving our heritage, you almost never hear anybody articulating any

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view of modernity. The intellectuals who must lead the debate are all stuck in the past.³⁰

Interestingly, Otabil's argument is very similar to what Achille Mbembe exposes in his critical article 'African modes of self-writing' (2002). Mbembe starts from the observation that the history of slavery, colonization, and apartheid and its result of African self-alienation, dispossession, and historical degradation, have become the centre of Africans' desire for self-knowledge, sovereignty, and autonomy. Yet, Mbembe argues, instead of radically criticising colonial assumptions, African discourses of the self developed within the racist paradigm, reappropriating the fundamental categories of the Western discourse they claim to oppose and reproducing their dichotomies. Under the guise of 'speaking in one's own voice,' the figure of the African as a victimised subject and the assertion of the African's cultural uniqueness, both profoundly rooted in the idea of race, serve to demarcate boundaries between 'native' and nonnative' and between the authentic and the inauthentic and to locate Africanity (or Africanness, in Otabil's terms) in a set of specific cultural characteristics. In chapter 5 I will discuss this search for an authentic Africanness and the dichotomies that lay at the base of it at length in the context of the Afrikania Mission. It is this, often nationalist, celebration of 'authentic African culture' that Otabil seeks to criticise. He sees it as his task to trigger a serious debate about 'what we are moving with and what we are leaving behind' by calling for 'cultural transformation' and tries to convince people that transforming their culture does not necessarily entail becoming 'western' and thus losing their 'African identity.'

Being African is not based on the definitions of my ancestors. Neither is it based on the limitations of their understanding at the time. So if my ancestors felt that the way to solve a particular problem at a particular time was in such a way, and over time I have discovered that there is a better way of solving the same problem, I cannot say that because they were my ancestors and that is how they solved the problem I should use the same methodology to solve my problems today. I don't see that if I move away from their world, I am moving away from my Africanness. I am still African, engaged in a modern, contemporary life with its problems. So I think that for all of us there is a tension between being African and being modern at the same time. Because somehow at the back of our minds there is the assumption that being African is almost the same as being ancient. And traditional or primitive. And I don't see Africanness as being traditional or primitive. It can be contemporary, it can be very modern. And I can think in modern terms and respond to modern challenges. When it comes to issues like child naming, we use very old traditional African symbols to name our children and I don't see any conflict between that and the modern challenges I am faced with. But when it comes to issues related to time management, to value for certain attitudes, that are required for a competitive society as we live in, we have a problem with African culture that slows us down. And I don't think that critiquing those behaviours alienates me from my Africanness. Because my Africanness is

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intrinsic, it is part of me. Nobody can give it to me and nobody can take it away from me. It is me.

The difference between Mbembe and Otabil, then, is that whereas Mbembe is not so much concerned with 'being African' (but rather with 'being cosmopolitan'), Otabil does want to be 'African' (and cosmopolitan at the same time). But the question is what that still is. Otabil is very outspoken on what that 'intrinsic Africanness' is not, that is, on all kinds of cultural practices that can be left behind without becoming less African. He is much weaker, however, on what remains. This is a fundamental challenge to his notion of Africanness.

Apart from 'issues of time management,' Otabil addresses in his messages many more restraining, ineffective or harmful practices and habits that he considers part of 'African culture' and that are to be left behind or transformed if Africans want to be successful in the world. These range from the habit of African men to have multiple girlfriends instead of being faithful and devoted to their wives, the restrictive pressure of the extended family, the uncritical reverence for the older generation ('don't act on the advice of people with wrong morals, even if she is your mother' ('The portrait of success')) to the habit of eating fatty foods and leading otherwise unhealthy life styles. While Otabil often refers to such practices in passing, the series 'Pulling down strongholds' is more profound and calls on people of African descent to move away from unproductive socio-cultural beliefs, arguments and negative traditions. He identifies seven major strongholds related to Africa's problems and discusses why they must be pulled down: inferiority complex, tribalism, cultural conservatism and stagnation, idolatry and fetishism, village mentality, bad leadership, and apathy (see Gifford 2004: 125-130). Here I will discuss the issues Otabil addresses in this and other messages that are relevant for the present discussion: Otabil's critique on both African traditional religion and much of African Pentecostalism, and on African leadership and politics.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, charismatics are generally suspicious towards traditional religious practices, regarded as 'devil worship,' and seek to spiritually deliver their followers from ties with local gods or ancestral spirits. Otabil opposes African traditional religion in a more intellectual way, arguing that traditional religion hinders personal growth and initiative and therefore national development.

African societies are plagued by a general passive, submissive attitude. There is no inquiry, no quest for knowledge. The roots of this attitude are in traditional religion. Although there is a large and valuable body of traditional knowledge, like medicine, this knowledge was very restricted. There was no broad training, but only training on a one-to-one basis, from father to son. Therefore development has been so slow. Moreover, although traditional medicine certainly has its value and works, the mystique around it – you have to buy this, you have to do that – made people believe more in the mystique than in the medicine itself. When it did indeed work, they attributed the power to the spirits or gods. Generally, *all power was placed outside the person in the spirit world*. This repressed any reflection on the inner self. It has to do with a particular concept

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of personhood. Christianity instead stimulates inquiry, self-questioning, general knowledge, and thus development. That is why I think the solution for Africa's problems lies in Christianity.³¹

Otabil's biggest problem with African traditional religion, then, is not that demons are worshipped, but that 'human effort is not encouraged' (Pulling down strongholds). But the 'particular concept of personhood' he criticises in African traditional religion, is very similar to that found in many miracle-oriented charismatic churches, where power, or more precisely, agency, is equally placed 'outside the person' and attributed to spirits, demons and witches. It has been argued that one of the reasons for the success of this type of Christianity in Africa is such continuity with traditional understandings of agency (e.g. Asamoah-Gyadu 2003, 2005c). It is thus not Christianity as such that will solve the problem of a passive, submissive attitude, but, Otabil claims, the kind of practical Christianity that he propagates. Indeed, Otabil's critique on the common tendency to hold evil spirits, demons, and witches responsible for one's misfortunes instead of taking one's own responsibility is as much a critique on African traditional religion as it is on many of his charismatic colleagues (including some in his own church, see next chapter), who 'cast out the demon of poverty rather than fighting the *culture* of poverty' (Teaching service 2 April 2002) and cast out ignorance in the name of Jesus rather than casting out ignorance through education (Gifford 2004:122). In a way, then, ironically, we can see Otabil as continuing the old missionaries' efforts of introducing modern notions of self centred on individualised, human agency. In contrast to the early missionaries, however, Otabil does acknowledge that 'we must pray against evil spirits and there may be witches around that we need to ward off' (Teaching service 2 April 2002), but he is not called to do those things, he is called to make people think and act. He does emphasise, however, that crucial to this thinking and acting is a deep spiritual life, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and an experience of the power of the Holy Spirit within and that this has a strong public significance. His repetitive call to let the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit guide personal and national progress alike, is thus also a critique on the secularist notion of modernity that draws on a problematic separation of spirit and reason and sees spirituality as restricted to private life and public life as governed by reason.

Political transformation

One of the key themes of Otabil's 'cultural adjustment theology' is leadership.

One of the reasons why Africa is where it is today is because of the immoral leadership we have had for a very long time. Leadership that has elevated corruption of virtue, corruption of character, corruption of choices, corruption of decision, which has resulted in mismanagement of our national resources.³²

Otabil's message thus has a strong political component (although he does not restrict leadership to the political sphere). He is well known for his critical stance towards the

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state and African leadership in general and his strong voice in public debates. In this, he strongly differs from most charismatic Christian leaders, who generally keep away from political debate and tend to be easily co-opted by the government (Gifford 2004).

During Rawlings' regime Otabil's call for 'radical political change' was widely misinterpreted to be New Patriotic Party sympathy, or even propaganda, and he was often seen as an opposition figure. Now that Kufour's opposition party has taken over power after the 2000 elections, he looks critically at the current regime. He criticises Kufour for traveling round the world to beg donor countries for money, thus turning Ghana into a begging nation, instead of dealing with structural internal problems. He says:

We have gone a step forward with Kufour as president, but I don't believe he can bring about the radical change necessary. He is more a maintenance president. Maybe he could lay some foundations, but not radical change.³³

The change Otabil aims at is more profound than party politics, a transformation of the general political culture in Ghana, and most other African countries. He is not afraid of criticising political leaders, be it never personally. 'One should not expect anything from Africa's rulers, because African leadership is concerned not with performance or responsibility, but status, power, even titles' ('Pulling down strongholds') (see also Bayart 1993).

Otabil divides the causes of Africa's current problems into three periods: pre-colonial times nurtured a passive, compliant attitude; the colonial regime gave Africans an inferiority complex; and post-colonial dictatorship installed fear in people.

Some people say the white people brought development. Well, thank the colonial master for some of the things they did, but you see, every railway line established by the colonial master ended up at the port. Every railway line, either Tema or Takoradi. From the mines to Takoradi. The reason is because they didn't do it so that you can travel. You were happy going third or fourth class, but the reason was that they could bring your timber and your gold faster to the port, and gone. So you sit down and say, o, they are developing our country, now we have railway lines. It's not development, it is facilitation of exploitation [laughter and applause] ('Africa must be free').

But, he says, 'we cannot attribute the causes of Africa's problems only to colonialism as people tend to do. Some of the root causes are much older' (interview 22 March 2002). He traces the untrustworthiness of African leaders to the era of slavery, when African chiefs took their own people captive, chained them, took them away and sold them.

We can not blame the Europeans only for the atrocities of slavery. It was very painful for me to come to the conclusion that Africans participated willingly and knowingly. But it is the truth that people sold their own people for a bit of sugar or a gun. Parents could even sell their stubborn child. The value of a

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horse was more than that of a human being. When I go to Elmina and I see the Castle and the town and the little distance between I always wonder how it could have been possible that these things were going on so close to where normal life was going on in the town. And people knew it. They knew that slaves were held in the dungeons in terrible conditions and were shipped. Local people went to the castle to negotiate deals. They knew what was going on there and yet there were no protests. What worries me most about this painful truth is the value of human life. That value was clearly very little. And the frightening question today is: *has this changed?* I believe it has changed only very marginally.³⁴

In a similar vein, Otabil writes in *Buy the Future*:

Much as I hold the European merchants responsible for their low regard for the sanctity of human life, the real question I ask myself is, 'How could our African forebears ever imagine that human life was equivalent to rum, sugar and guns from Europe?' [...] Europe sold us their processed present commodities and we sold them our future (Otabil 2002:89-90).

The issue of slavery is a sensitive problem in Ghana, and Otabil makes it even more so by stating that 'African chiefs are still doing it today. These days they are not called chiefs. They are called Presidents and Prime ministers and they are still doing it.'³⁵ They are still 'selling' their own people because by their bad leadership they leave people no other option than to go and queue and be humiliated at the embassies and airports to have themselves shipped to foreign lands only to suffer and be exploited. 'Our young men and women are leaving our nations to labour and build other civilizations. The future is being sold again' (Otabil 2002:90).

When Otabil talks about leadership, he thus refers to both national governments and the chieftaincy system, but also to leadership in schools, offices, and homes. What needs to be transformed in his view is Ghana's general political culture, where anyone who assumes a leadership position becomes a 'chief,' that is, holds that position for life, is beyond accountability, talks about development, but only makes himself a big man and establishes his own position of power. 'Ghana's culture of leadership is merely a continuation of old structures in a new disguise. It is all about power' (interview 22 March 2002). Ironically, we can say – and local critics do indeed say – the same about charismatic Christian leadership, Otabil inclusive.

The responsibility for bad leadership, however, lies partially with the citizens themselves. Otabil says, 'until we accept responsibility, we cannot change our condition.'³⁶ In 'Africa must be free' he tells his listeners

We have to start putting pressure on our leaders in our nation to do the right thing. And the way to do that is for you to understand. I tell people our problem is not party politics. Most of you think, we change the government, everything will be solved. That is the narrowest mind thinking. Because the problem is not a party-political problem. It is that the African leader has not learnt hon-

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esty, sincerity, truthfulness, irrespective of whichever party he is in. So one corrupt government will succeed another corrupt government. So the thinking for you to do is not to be mad about the party you support, but be mad about what you think should be right in your nation and insist on it. If we don't do that brothers, parties will come and be corrupt. We have all seen it. Just because you shout slogans doesn't mean you will not be corrupt. Because if certain principles have not been developed in you over the years, you will be corrupt. When you see the millions pass by, your eyes begin to go. Then your hand begins to move involuntary and all of a sudden your fingers are beginning to touch some cedis. It is sweet. After a year your conscience is dead and you can lie with a straight face. You know why African leaders can lie with a straight face? They believe everybody out there is ignorant. And you can always deceive them. It is only the ignorant who are deceived.

Crucial in Otabil's cultural adjustment theology therefore are education, knowledge, and critical thinking.³⁷ Stimulating and contributing to that is what he sees as his calling.

Because of his political vision, many of his fans say they would want Otabil as president.³⁸ But although he has seriously considered it (interview 22 March 2002), he thinks that the political game would not leave him enough room to do what he thinks is really necessary for this country to go forward. He would rather like to be a consultant to the president and work together intensively. Otabil's ultimate concern is the transformation of Ghana into a successful nation, and of the entire African continent. He is convinced that this should neither come from the government, nor from 'the developed world.' Nor can it be attained by praying for the healing of the nation, for God's miraculous intervention. The solution to Ghana's problems lies in the personal transformation of individual Ghanaians and Africans into responsible citizens and responsible leaders in Christ. As the ICGC motto puts it, 'Raising leaders, shaping vision, and influencing society through Christ.'

The pitfall of Otabil's role as the 'teacher of the nation' is that his message is perceived as too intellectualist, 'too-know' in Ghanaian parlance. This is indeed a common criticism of Otabil. Otabil surfs on the wave of popularity of charismatic Pentecostalism, while at the same time distancing himself from the basis of this very popularity, the emphasis on spiritual intervention in people's daily struggles and problems. Otabil's criticism of this specifically Pentecostal concern in order to attract a much broader, cross-religious audience, is much like a 'replay' of the old message of modernity as put forward by Nkrumah and his generation (although Otabil critiques this as well). Although this secularist message is still part of the repertoire of public debate, it has lost much of its convincing power to charismatic Pentecostalism. Its failure to fulfil the expectations of modernity it created is grist to the mill of charismatic churches, that deal with (individual and national) failure through the spirit powers that allegedly cause it (demons) and may conquer it (the Holy Spirit). Even if charismatic Pentecostalism's promises of success and riches will neither materialise for all of its followers and thus form one of its major weaknesses, many of these followers (still) focus their hopes and expectations on the life transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

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By distancing himself from the spiritualist message of his colleagues, Otabil thus risks distancing himself as well from the people that make up the charismatic movement, including his own church members. The dynamics in which Otabil is caught, then, complicate his strategies of self-representation. Financially, he depends on his church members' tithes and donations and on charismatics in other churches patronising his conventions and other programmes. He also needs them to show up in his church, because a (tele)visible mass following will make or break his reputation as a powerful pastor. The contradiction of Otabil's dual role, then, is that as a celebrity he needs fans, who praise him and admire him for his teaching of the nation, but are too volatile to build upon. As a pastor he needs followers, who not only finance his projects, but also authenticate his power. As much as these followers are attracted by the intellectualist content of his message, they also seek spiritual transformation (see chapter 3 and appendix III). Otabil's dilemma of distancing himself from mainstream charismatic Pentecostalism while at the same time drawing upon its repertoires forms a tension in his church that will be worked out in chapter 3.

A religious vision on modernity in Africa

Otabil's public authority depends largely on his innovative and critical vision on African modernity discussed above. This deserves some further reflection before we move to concluding remarks about charisma, branding, and religious celebrity. Many scholars have related the exponential growth and tremendous popularity of charismatic churches in Ghana, as well as in many sub-Saharan African countries, to the ways in which this new Christianity addresses the conditions of modernity in the postcolonial society (Gifford 1998, 2004; Meyer 1999; Ter Haar 1994; Van Dijk 1997). In a context where many people are disillusioned by the state's promises of bringing development and well-being, of making Ghana catch up with the rest of the modern world, charismatic churches offer people an alternative road to modern life and wealth, and a feeling of participation in a global society of successful Christians that transcends the national mess of poverty, corruption, and unemployment. The mass media technologies they use, the globalised images they show and songs they sing, the futuristic buildings they build, and the individualised, breaking-with-the-past life styles they promote give them an aura of modernity that makes their promises highly convincing. At the same time, as I argue throughout this thesis, their success cannot be explained without recognising the continuities they show with African traditional religiosity: their thisworldly focus on health, wealth, and status, their emphasis on the effective presence of spirit powers, the role of the religious specialist as a mediator between these powers and humans, and the hierarchical, personalised, and opaque structures of authority, often referred to as the 'big men syndrome' (see also Asamoah-Gyadu 2005a; Gifford 2004). Charismatic preachers thus urge us, not only by their messages, but also by their performances and modes of operation, to rethink the modern and the traditional, and the relationship between religion and modernity in Africa. What these African churches present us with is a religious invention of modernity that does never fully fit into a tight, classical Western notion of the modern, characterised

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by values of rationality, scientific thinking, democracy, accountability and transparency (see also Geschiere 1997; Geschiere, Meyer and Pels 2008). Neither does the part that does not fit makes them less 'modern,' nor does the part that does fit makes them less 'African.'

What makes Otabil's particular vision on modernity so powerful, is his synthesis of concepts that are commonly thought to be incompatible because they belong to the opposite poles of the in Ghana so pervasive dualist framework of tradition versus modernity. First, cosmopolitanism and African identity: bridging the perceptual gap between being African and being modern and developed, he offers people a way of feeling connected to and part of the world, of being global citizens without having to lose their sense of 'Africanness.' Yet, whereas Otabil's vision of the way forward for Ghana entails a quite clear picture of 'what we are leaving behind' (of our African culture), he is much vaguer on 'what we are moving with.' It is obvious from the above what Africanness is not, but what it is, remains very abstract. 'It is intrinsic, it is me.' Even his dress and his name that he uses as markers of his African identity, are in his final analysis not more African than English, Christian names or suit and tie. Nevertheless, these are powerful symbols in his embodiment of African self-confidence. Secondly, he integrates spiritual power and rationality: in order to be successful, as a person, as a corporation, or as a nation, you need both. Spirituality and spiritual power (of the Holy Spirit) are thus not restricted to the inner person, but have a very strong public, political significance. At the same time, for Otabil, reason, knowledge and scientific thinking are crucial not only for the proper functioning of states and public institutions, but also for managing individual lives. One cannot go without the other. Thirdly, he combines individual self-development and communal identification. He talks about the power to design your own life through personal choice, agency, and talent, and about liberation from all kinds of cultural and social constraints. But Otabil also appeals strongly to a sense of belonging. Not only to the church or to wider 'Christian family,' but to Ghana, through repeated reference, either in a serious, critical or humorous fashion, to a shared experience of being Ghanaian, of having grown up in Ghana, of living in Ghana with all its frustrating, shocking, or hilarious, but always recognisable ways.

Otabil's argument to escape the African-identity-versus-western-modernity paradigm, then, is very similar to that of scholars like Jean-Francois Bayart, who asks: 'how can we avoid thinking of acculturation and globalisation as a simple zero-sum game in which adherence to foreign representations and customs inevitably leads to a loss of substance and authenticity?' (2005). The big difference, however, and one that accounts for its attraction, is that Otabil's answer to this question does not remain intellectual only. Like that of many other charismatic preachers, Otabil's version of modernity is highly stylised, produced through PR strategies that depend on both modern media technologies and personal embodiment. With his well-fed body wrapped in luxurious, costly African outfits, Otabil embodies 'the African dream' of many young people in Ghana's cities: to be wealthy and successful, wise and handsome, to have a beautiful wife and kids to be proud of, to live in a global world of unlimited intercontinental travel and foreign friends and yet be confident about being African. As an icon of success, Otabil exemplifies the self-made man, who has made it

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to the global top through hard and honest work from the same underprivileged position and in the same underprivileged part of the world as many young Ghanaians today. Otabil's body and image, as it is 'produced' by his media and PR department and by himself, becomes a 'screen' on which to project ordinary Ghanaians' hopes and aspirations for the future. Indeed, Otabil embodies the future that many would wish for themselves. It is this combination of a thoughtful and original message and an effective management of style, public image and charisma that makes him so successful, far beyond charismatic circles, in attracting people to a religious and African design of modernity.

Conclusion: charisma, branding, and religious celebrity

In this chapter I have examined Otabil's public personality as constituted by his particular style of performance, visual and textual marketing strategies, and his distinctive message. In an article on the use of imagery in Reinhard Bonnke's global charismatic ministry, Gordon and Hancock argue that Bonnke's particular success 'lies in the ways that the visual reconstitutes the charismatic core of Pentecostalism in connection with his development of a "brand scenario"' (2005:387). In chapter 4 I will pick up on their argument about the particular praxis of looking and ideology of visualisation contained in Pentecostal imagery. Here I wish to point to the contradiction inherent in this process of 'branding charisma': the development of a 'brand identity' comprises a highly structured set of instantly recognizable logo, trademark, package design, slogan, jingle et cetera, while charismatic authority depends on a sense of free flow of spiritual gifts and power. Otabil's authority is based on charisma defined as the perception among his followers and admirers of supernatural giftedness, of divine anointing. Yet, as we have seen in this chapter, it is a kind of charisma that is carefully designed, crafted, and marketed, branded, so as to create him as a religious celebrity. At the same time, the work of designing, crafting, marketing, and branding must not show if Otabil's charisma is to be perceived as 'genuine,' that is, God-given and not man-made, and thus powerful.

As charisma resides in the encounter between preacher and listeners, Otabil's charisma is what binds him to an audience, both inside and outside his church. (Media) communication and representation is crucial to this binding. It is exactly this double target audience, however, his religiously diverse fans (outside his own church) and his born-again followers (in his own church), that complicates his strategies of representation. This will become clearer in the next chapter, which will bring out the tension between in-church practices of becoming a born-again Christian and an ICGC member and the public image of Otabil described here. First, let me offer some further reflection on Otabil's address of his media fans as consumers of a particular brand of charismatic inspiration.

In marketing theory, 'branding' seems to involve three things. First, the distinction of a particular product, line, service, or firm from similar products, lines, services, or firms. Secondly, the promotion of consumer awareness of this particular distinctive identity or quality. And thirdly, the effort to create loyalty on the part of consumers, to

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make them continue buying the same brand of goods despite the availability of competing brands. In the religious, and especially the charismatic marketplace, numerous new churches offer a similar 'product,' salvation and success. They compete with other churches by trying to appear as more genuine, more powerful, more sophisticated, more modern or in one or the other way better than others, thus attracting and binding people to the church despite the presence of so many other churches offering basically the same thing.

Otabil's brand of charisma is clearly marked by a distinguishing image, a 'logo,' not only the official ICGC logo, but even more so the image of Otabil himself. The image of the body of the pastor as a public figure takes on commodity logic and becomes an icon for people to buy, as a bookmark for instance. This image embodies his entire philosophy and vision. His brand, then, clearly comprises a distinguishing message. Otabil seems to have a patent on the message of social awareness and African consciousness. First, in interviews he is reluctant to talk about others who may have inspired his theology – Myles Munroe of Bahamas Faith Ministries International, for example, preaches a very similar message – but claims it as purely his own invention, ascribing it only to the Holy Spirit. Secondly, when others start preaching similar messages, people see this as a sign of 'Otabilisation' of Ghana's charismatic Christianity (Gifford 2004:198). Finally, by way of 'brand quality protection,' Otabil selects only those sermons that fit his brand message for broadcasting and marketing purposes.

The difference between branding and marketing a product – a thing – and branding and marketing a pastor – a person – may not be as big as it seems. A branded commodity has to appear as being above branding, as being 'more' than the sum of what goes into its making, for customers to 'believe' in its power. Branding has to erase itself in a way. When we look at the celebrity scene, we see very similar processes of marketing and authenticating personalities going on, be they music stars, actors, TV presenters or, increasingly, politicians (Hockett 2005). The media make them celebrities and at the same time try to convince us that this is who they really are. Otabil's authority as well is based on this kind of commodified charisma, which is authenticated as a genuine form of leadership yet cannot exist outside the commodity and celebrity registers. His authority derives for a large part from his celebrity status, his being a national and international star. His message and his public personality are the two pillars on which his status as a religious celebrity (and indeed his entire ministry) is built. But despite similarities with 'secular' stars, there is something specific about religious celebrity. One characteristic of celebrity status is that it magnetically attracts the non-famous, who, by being close to a celebrity, hope to almost magically acquire a little of his or her aura. The connection between the public personality and the spiritual gifts of a charismatic leader is that the higher a pastor's celebrity status, the more his audience is likely to perceive his anointing as 'powerful' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005c). Otabil's celebrity status as produced by media images authenticates the impression or implicit message that he is not a 'mere' media creation, but embodies effective spiritual power. The question of authentication is significant in the context of local allegations about 'fake pastors' and 'false prophets' described in chapter 1.

I would argue, then, that the religious authority of African 'men of God' such

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as Otabil thrives on the convergence of the mass mediated and marketed charisma of modern celebrity and the charisma of an African shrine priest perceived as an intermediary between the human and the spirit world. In other words, the figure of the celebrity pastor fuses global celebrities' embodiment of the enchanting power of global consumerism with traditional priests' embodiment of divine power. It is in this sense that Otabil functions as a medium: through him people can get access to a kind of spiritual power, partake in his spiritual anointing, that thrives to a large extent on his status as a national and international celebrity, a status shared with Nelson Mandela, Kojo Antwi and other personalities depicted by local roadside painters. It is this magical aura of celebrity that is at work in the transmission of Holy Spirit power from the Man of God to his followers through the rituals of interaction that are examined in the next chapter. The convergence of celebrity and spiritual power is fragile though. The perpetual challenge is that the process of branding charisma, 'the making of Otabil,' must remain invisible for the audience. As soon as it shows through, it threatens to undermine their sense of authenticity and destroy this magical aura.

Notes

¹ Asamoah-Gyadu identifies 'anointing' as 'the key phenomenon that charismatic figures mediate through their televised ministries' (2005c:15) and defines it as 'the empowering presence of God, that makes things happen' or 'the power of God in action' (Ibid.:22).

² This is not to say that the power of shrine priests does not depend on what we could call 'marketing strategies.' It does, but, as will become clear in chapters 5 and 6, on very different ones than the mass media strategies employed by charismatic pastors. See Geschiere (2002) for an interesting analysis of the parallels between American spin-doctors and African witch-doctors and the dialectics of secrecy and publicity in their ways of exercising power.

³ The bible passage charismatics mostly draw upon is 1 Corinthians 12 (8 – 10), in which Apostle Paul distinguishes nine gifts: the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, the gift of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the discerning of spirits, various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.

⁴ For Weber, Jesus' words 'It is written..., but I say unto you,...' are the basic proposition for every charismatic authority (Weber 1968:51; see also Lindholm 1990:5). Whatever the leader says, it is right because the leader says it, also if it goes against common knowledge.

⁵ I am aware of the danger in presenting Otabil and his message in terms of strategy and marketing, which might seem to implicitly question his sincerity or his authenticity. My focus on 'the making of Otabil' is certainly not meant to do so, but to lay bare some of the dynamics and contradictions of his project. I do hope that this chapter also speaks to my admiration for Otabil, his daring and thought provoking messages, and his remarkable achievements.

⁶ We have to remark here that the owner and editor-publisher of the *Chronicle*, Kofi Coomson, is a member of Agyin-Asare's Word Miracle Church International, but a personal friend and admirer of Otabil and also engages in the distribution of Otabil's Living Word tapes. Although such congratulatory editorials and news items are thus more frequent in the *Chronicle* than in other newspapers (see also Gifford 2004:138), the *Chronicle* is certainly not an exception in singling out Otabil as the only 'good' charismatic preacher.

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⁷ Interview 16 March 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview in *The Mirror*, 6 May 1989, quoted in Asamoah-Gyadu (2005a:229, emphasis mine, MdW).

¹⁰ www.centralgospel.com

¹¹ Examples include the international advisory board of the African Public Broadcasting Foundation.

¹² Central University College has its origins in a short-term pastoral training institute, which was started in 1988 by the ICGC and later named Central Bible College. In line with national aspirations, the College expanded its programme to include an integrated and practice-oriented business school. To reflect its new status as a liberal arts university, the name was changed to Central University College in 1997. It has a School of Theology and Mission, a School of Business Administration and Management, and a Centre for Pentecostal Studies.

¹³ Interview 16 March 2005. To have an extra source of income next to members' tithes and donations, Otabil considers establishing a financial institution. He has already set up a credit union and a mutual association. 'The financial weight of the church and the Central University would be enough to run a bank. At present the university has its saving with the Mataheko branch of the Social Security Bank and it sustains that branch almost on its own. So then why can't we sustain our own bank? Especially when we also think about members' savings, and the finances of members' companies. It will very well be possible. Central Bank? Sounds a bit like a government institution, ha ha.' The American evangelist Pat Robertson is also engaged in banking and real estate.

¹⁴ His wife Joy is known as the 'first lady' of church, leads the women's department, and has, some say, more influence than pastors.

¹⁵ Cf. Gordon and Hancock (2005) on Reinhard Bonnke's 'brand image.'

¹⁶ Interview 22 March 2002.

¹⁷ This is typical of African Big Man status. What is not, however, is Otabil's age. The fact that he is young (born in 1960), yet authoritative is interesting in the African 'gerontocratic' context and points to a shift in the constitution of authority.

¹⁸ I use the term 'religious marketplace' (Finke and Stark 1992; Moore 1994; Ukah 2003) not in the narrow sense of a system of demand and supply, where people make choices based on rational calculations of profit, but more loosely in the sense of a field of competition for followers who can be captured on the basis of strong public presence and seducing and convincing rhetoric and imagery. While I see significant parallels between the American and the Ghanaian cases, an important difference is that in Ghana the (economic) competition for followers between charismatic-Pentecostal pastors has its roots in a much older, pre-colonial religious dynamics of competing religious specialists.

¹⁹ In the adventure film *The Wild Geese* (1978) a British multinational seeks to overthrow a vicious dictator in central Africa. It hires a band of mercenaries in London and sends them in to save the virtuous but imprisoned opposition leader who is also critically ill and due for execution. Just when the team has performed a perfect rescue, the multinational does a deal with the vicious dictator leaving the mercenary band to escape under their own steam and exact revenge.

²⁰ Interview 16 March 2005.

²¹ See appendix II for a more exhaustive list of message titles.

²² See Martin 1990 on 'transformation' as a key notion in charismatic Pentecostalism.

²³ Responding to the trend that 'by 2000 virtually everything in Ghana had to be prophetic' (Gifford 2004:90), Otabil, who certainly does not present himself as a prophet, also started giving annual prophetic declarations, which are marketed as bookmarks (figs. 2.11 and 2.12) and audio CD's.

2. Mensa Otabil

²⁴ Workshops offered include 'Personal change management', creativity and innovation', Interpersonal Communication Skills', 'Leadership', 'Team-Building', 'Conflict Management', 'Coaching', 'Self-Management', 'Project Management', and 'Female Leadership.'

²⁵ The link from the ICGC website to the Otabil and Associates website was purposely removed.

²⁶ Interview 16 March 2005.

²⁷ Message series 'Pulling down strongholds.'

²⁸ First Ofori-Atta lecture, quoted in Gifford (2004:125).

²⁹ See also Otabil's 'heritage lectures', where he asks 'what is African culture?', 'what does being African entail?' and calls for a 'paradigm shift' and for 'African Renaissance.'

³⁰ Otabil mentioned one exception, the Cameroonian scholar Daniel Etounga-Manguelle, who wrote a chapter 'Does Africa need a cultural adjustment program?' in the volume *Culture Matters* (2000), a book that inspired Otabil.

³¹ Interview 22 March 2002.

³² Speech at CUC matriculation, 13 January 2001, quoted in Gifford 2004:129.

³³ Interview 22 March 2002.

³⁴ Interview 22 March 2002.

³⁵ 'The people don't care', quoted in Gifford 2004:123.

³⁶ 'The people don't care', quoted in Gifford 2004:124.

³⁷ With his emphasis on education and knowledge, Otabil in a way links up with the early missionary project of education and civilisation. This seems to contradict the argument made by some observers about 'the end of education', that the success and esteem of Africa's big men in today's era of neo-liberal capitalism no longer depends on education and academic titles, as it did in the past, but on riches and conspicuous consumption (e.g. De Boeck and Plissart 2004; De Koning 2005; Ndijo 2006). Otabil embodies both the scholar and the business man and his authority hinges on both.

³⁸ Radio interview and news item (Me for President? Never! Otabil dashes expectations of Christian majority, Ghanaian Chronicle 22 Jan 2005). In 1998, Otabil was nominated for the Man of the Year award, the only 'Man of God' among a bunch of political figures.

