Spirit media: charismatics, traditionalists, and mediation practices in Ghana

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Media Afrikania

Styles and strategies of representation

Introduction

In April 2003 Kafui Nyaku, a programme producer with the private television station TV3, approached the head of the Afrikania Mission, Osofo Ameve, to make a documentary on the survival of ‘African traditional religion’ in times of Christian dominance. It was to appear as part of the weekly series ‘Insight.’ Keen on public representation, but restricted by lack of money, Ameve was pleased with this proposal, as it promised half an hour of television exposure at the expense of TV3. What followed, however, was a long process of negotiations between the TV crew and Afrikania leaders, members, shrine priests and priestesses. In the end there was much frustration and a disappointing result. Ameve was especially bothered by the abundant shots of a goat and fowl sacrifice at one of Afrikania’s rural branches. He felt that this would only confirm popular Christian stereotypes of traditional religion as cruel and backward. According to Ameve, ‘the media always refuse to show how beautiful traditional religion can be, because they are all Christians.’

This chapter examines the Afrikania Mission’s struggles with the mass media and the dilemmas it faces in its attempts to counter the dominant image of traditional religion with an alternative image. In the face of the general negative public opinion on African traditional religion and the fierce contestation of particular traditional religious practices examined in the previous chapter, Afrikania is very much concerned with public representation and promotion. In response to the assertive visibility and audibility of charismatic Christian churches in the public sphere, the Afrikania Mission actively seeks to access the media to also establish a public presence and gain recognition for ATR. Its politics of representation is complicated, however, not only by its limited financial means, but also by its awkward position in between the dominant, Christian formats and styles of representing religion and the shrine priests and priestesses that it claims to represent, but who are often more concerned with concealing than with revealing.

To repeat the central concern of this thesis, the religious appropriation of mass media raises the question of how the formal particularities of a medium relate to the formal particularities of religious practice. I have taken as a point of departure that neither religion nor media can be reduced to the other; they are mutually constitutive. Mass media are never a purely technical form that can be applied to the realm of religion; rather, they entail specific formats, styles, and modes of address. The question is how these different aspects of media resonate with, clash with, or transform religious
modes of representation and practices of mediating spiritual power and connecting to the divine. Linked to this set of concerns is the question of how mass media formats relate to the constitution of religious authority. Although the adoption of mass media is never smooth and uncontested, some religious forms seem to be particularly well-suited to technological mass representation. In chapter 4 I have argued that the success of the televisual culture of charismatic Pentecostalism in Ghana can be traced to the similarity between specific formats, styles, and modes of address of the medium of television and the Pentecostal emphasis on spectacle, mass spirituality, revelation, and charismatic authority. With African traditional religions, the use of mass media is much more problematic and contested. The emphasis on secrecy and concealment, in practices of dealing with spiritual power, and in the constitution of religious authority does not easily fit the publicity of audiovisual mass mediation.

To understand the dynamics of African religion in an era of rapid mass media development, we can thus not limit ourselves to studying doctrines, beliefs, and rituals, but must take into account matters of style and format associated with public media representation. Challenging easy oppositions of form and content, medium and message, this chapter deals with the interplay of religious formats and media formats in the reconfiguration and public representation of a highly contested religion. It does so by situating these dynamics in the context of the wider power relations within the media field discussed in chapter 1 and its dominant discourses and representations of religion. For Afrikania, the historical changes in the relations between the media, the state, and religion in Ghana, resulting in the current charismatic-Pentecostal media dominance, have been crucial not only for its possibilities of media representation, but also for the media styles it has adopted or has been forced to adopt.

We have seen that Pentecostal-charismatic churches not only broadcast their message, but also found ways to mass-mediate charisma, a sense of spiritual power, and miraculous experiences. This chapter points out that Afrikania uses the media mainly to spread an intellectualist message about traditional religion. While communicating and being in touch with spirit powers is key to African religious traditions, Afrikania leaders hardly include this aspect in the mass-mediated face of traditional religion. The first part of the chapter shows how new media opportunities and constraints have pushed Afrikania to adapt its strategies of accessing the media and its styles of representation. The second part presents an analysis of a series of Afrikania media events, to address the larger issue of the relation between practices of dealing with spiritual power and the formats and technologies of audiovisual mass mediation. Adopting media formats such as the documentary, the news item, and the spectacle, involves a constant struggle over revelation and concealment and entails the neglect of much of the spiritual power that constitutes African traditional religions.

Afrikania in the media: from voice to image

From its birth in 1982, the Afrikania Mission has made use of mass media – first radio and print, and later also television – to establish a public presence, to disseminate its message, and to attract followers. Yet, over the last decade Afrikania’s relation with
and operation in the media field has drastically changed as a result of shifting rela-
tions between the media, the state, and religion. Not only have these changes made
Afrikania’s access to the media increasingly problematic, they have also altered the
frames and formats upon which Afrikania can draw in its efforts at self-representation.

Damuah and the media: the voice of spiritual nationalism
As pointed out in chapter 1, until 1992, the media in Ghana were largely controlled by
the state, which favoured ‘African tradition’ in its promotion of national culture,
among other channels through the media. During Damuah’s time, Afrikania’s friendly
rapport and convergence of interests with Rawlings’ government sustained its con-
stant media presence and made the movement and its leader widely known. First,
Afrikania had a privileged position on state radio, the only radio at that time. While
Rawlings banned all Christian radio and TV programmes from the airwaves, the
Afrikania Mission, as the religious branch of the revolution, was the only religious
group granted airspace on state radio. Its weekly radio broadcast, in which Damuah
explained Afrikania’s objectives and ideologies, thus reached a large audience
throughout the nation. Every Tuesday evening, Afrikania voiced its ideology out to
the nation, drawing upon the anti-western rhetoric of the political and cultural revolu-
tion.

This is Afrikania Mission, the religion of those who have freed themselves from
foreign religions and have the courage to serve God according to their con-
science and the holy traditions of Africa. Yes, Afrikania is a way of life and
more especially a spiritual revolution that tells the African to be himself (open-
ing Afrikania radio broadcast, 3 October 1989, quoted in Boogaard 1993:86)

The same revolutionary rhetoric characterized Afrikania’s newspaper Afrikania Voice.
The four pages of the January 1989 issue, for example, are filled with a front page arti-
cle by Damuah on ‘Traditional Religion: New Look,’ a back page article by Ameve on
‘The African Traditional and Cultural Heritage,’ and centre page articles on ‘Jesus was
a Black Man,’ ‘We need a strong Africa,’ and ‘How missionaries enslave people.’
Although the front page headline suggests a concern with the image of ATR, the
newspaper’s name rightly captures its aim of public speaking, of circulating
Afrikania’s teachings discursively rather than visually. Compared to Afrikania’s radio
broadcast, however, the Afrikania Voice issued these teachings of spiritual revolution
much more irregularly and reached a very limited audience.

Secondly, Damuah was constantly present at all kinds of official ceremonies,
which greatly enhanced his appearance in the news. News in the state media was
(and still is) structured around public figures of importance (Hasty 2005) and Damuah
certainly was such a political Big Man. Thirdly, Damuah and other Afrikania leaders
were regularly invited to appear on state television, most notably the talk show
Cultural Heritage, to express their opinion in all public debates touching on traditional
culture and religion. In chapter 1 I have argued that programmes such as this rearticu-
lated, polished and framed African traditional religion as ‘cultural heritage,’ and were primarily aimed at generating and disseminating knowledge about traditional religion and culture to boost national pride. This in contrast to a Christian programme like Church Service, that served to encourage people to participate in Christian religion. The media’s preference for ATR over other religions thus also implied a reduction of traditional religion to ‘cultural heritage’ as part of a nationalist project. Not presented as religion in itself, African traditional religion in the state media was never meant to inspire people’s religious life. Three interrelated media frames were thus available to Afrikania during the first decade: revolutionary rhetoric, news structured around Big Men, and cultural heritage.1

Ameve and the media: public image and beautification

When Ghana returned to democracy in 1992, the consequences for the public representation of Afrikania and ATR were enormous. Afrikania’s loss of government support, including free airtime, put an end to Afrikania’s radio broadcast. More generally, as described in chapter 1, the process of democratisation fundamentally changed the Ghanaian media field and resulted in a strong charismatic-Pentecostal media dominance. The implication of the entanglement of Pentecostalism and the Ghanaian media for the representation of traditional religion is that these churches use the media not only to advertise their own success and morality, but at the same time circulate a counter image of the non-Christian Other that finds fertile ground in the pentecostally-oriented public sphere. Their diabolisation of African traditional religion nurtures a widespread animosity, which is rooted in a long history of Christian suppression. The media play an important role in reinforcing popular fears and fascinations with sensational stories and images of ‘juju’ priests and shrines as persons and places of evil. Tabloid front pages (figs. 8.8, 8.11) scream about ‘occultists’ trading in human blood and organs, calendars depict the ‘true life story’ of a man ritually sacrificing his wife in exchange for millions of dollars, and radio stations broadcast live-on-air testimonies of people confessing their previous visits to shrines and revealing the sacrificial demands the priests would make. Whereas the dominant media image of Christianity is created by Christians themselves, be it a particular type of Christians, the public image of African traditional religion is not shaped by adherents of this religion, but rather by those who despise it. The Afrikania Mission, dedicated to the public promotion of ATR, tries to counter such negative, stereotypical representations with a more positive image.

Whereas in its early days, Afrikania’s representation strategies were mainly rhetorical and discursive, with the expansion of television culture in general and religious television in particular, Ameve is now more than ever concerned with public image, with beautification, with making ATR look attractive. Afrikania’s access to the media, however, has become increasingly difficult. As it no longer enjoys free airtime, it has to compete with others in a Christian dominated media scene. The major setback for Afrikania vis-à-vis the charismatic churches is lack of financial resources. Afrikania has never been money minded and in this time of commercial media this makes it difficult to make its voice heard and even more difficult to be seen. Half an
hour radio airtime may cost about $50, excluding the registration fee and the ‘chop money’ for all the workers involved. For thirty TV minutes one pays $600, a huge sum for Afrikania, where members pay monthly dues of 1,000 cedis ($0.12), if they pay at all, and contribute coins rather than banknotes to the Sunday collection. As pointed out in chapter 5, Afrikania’s major source of money is Ameve’s private capital. He used this to pay for airtime on GBC radio for some time, but he stopped his regular radio preaching when he thought it more effective to invest in the new building and the establishment of the Priesthood Training School. Another disadvantage Afrikania faces compared to Christian churches is the low number of traditionalists working in the media sector. Almost all professionals working with the various media houses are Christians, and often convinced born-again Christians, and this influences media content and framing. As Gideon, a young Afrikania member working with GBC radio, told me, the few traditionalists working in the media always have to face the majority attitude of their Christian colleagues. Lack of money and of connections in the media sector thus make it very difficult for Afrikania to counter the Christian hegemony and to influence public opinion on ATR.

Furthermore, Afrikania’s interactions with the media are thorny because the shrine priests and priestesses that it wishes to represent are far from eager to cooperate as they are often more concerned with concealing that with revealing. They often do not recognise themselves in the public image of beauty that Afrikania seeks to present. But, more importantly, many of them feel they have nothing to gain from media publicity and choose instead to remain somewhat secretive. Their spiritual authority depends on highly restricted access to spiritual knowledge and practice. Afrikania’s aim of reforming and making ATR public clashes with the performance of secrecy that surrounds traditional religious practices. This tension between Afrikania’s project and shrine priests’ concerns with spiritual power and secrecy often flares up during media activities, when Afrikania finds itself caught between those it aims to represent and the available means and modes of representation. Afrikania’s leaders are aware of the concerns of shrine priest(esse)s, but they also know that in order to gain recognition and compete with Christian churches, they have to create a clean and beautiful image and make this image public through the various media channels. Yet, they are also highly suspicious of the media, because of their Christian bias and ‘wrong’ portrayal of traditional religion as filthy, ugly, and backwards, or worse, as evil and demonic. An analysis of Afrikania’s various interactions with the media highlights these dilemmas.

Struggling with media formats

As Afrikania does not have the financial and technological means to produce and broadcast—and thus control—its own programmes as charismatic churches do, its leaders try to find other ways into the media. They depend, however, on the goodwill and concerns of journalists and media houses and struggle with media formats that do not allow them full control over the message and image produced and circulated in the public sphere. As pointed out in the previous chapter, Afrikania enters the
media in relation to public issues, debates, and conflicts. Such public debates impose certain formats on Afrikania’s interactions with the media and certain ways of framing. The main media formats available to the Afrikania Mission are the talk show, the news, and to a lesser extent, the documentary format. With these formats, however, Afrikania can never check the eventually broadcast or published messages and images that journalists make of its media performance. In contrast to AltarMedia’s production of Living Word, discussed in chapter 4, with Afrikania’s media representations it is always other people who select, edit, and frame shots and quotes. This section discusses examples of Afrikania’s struggles with each of these three media formats.

Talk shows
When invited, Ameve or other Afrikania leaders feature in radio and sometimes television talk shows, which gives them the opportunity to make Afrikania’s political-religious voice heard in public debates, to create awareness among the people, and to get recognition for African religion. Yet, it is always the talk show host who directs the interviews and more or less controls what can be said and what not. On radio, the talk show that most often hosts Afrikania is Peace FM’s Wo gyidie ne sen? (what do you believe?), a talk show with representatives of various religions discussing a certain topic. Here, however, I will concentrate on television talk shows.

For some time Ameve was, like Damuah before, regularly invited for the state TV programmes Cultural Heritage and About Life, both mentioned earlier, and In the Light. He acted as a cultural specialist to boost the nation’s knowledge of ‘our culture’ and moulded traditional religion into the heritage frame provided by the state. During the late nineties, for example, Ameve featured in About Life broadcasts on topics such as ‘bans on drumming,’ ‘culture and religion,’ ‘culture and morality,’ and ‘occultism.’ Cultural Heritage and About Life continued to be broadcast until a few years ago, but have, according to the GTV head of religious programming Pearl Adotey, now ‘served their goal and are no more relevant.’ This may be interpreted as another indication of the Pentecostalisation of the public sphere. Interestingly, when Ameve was invited to a talk show on one of the private TV stations, TV3’s Hot Issues, the framework initially appeared similar as Ameve was asked to talk about ‘the religion of the African’ and pushed into, but also feeling quite comfortable in, the role of the intellectual talking about the Egyptian origin of African religion, the various spiritual beings ‘the African’ believes in, and the significance of libation. Soon, however, the host started challenging Ameve, using words like ‘fetish’ and ‘primitive’ and the conversation turned into an antagonistic verbal fight between the Christian and the non-Christian. A fragment:

Host: So when we describe [your way of worship] as primitive, why do you want to contest it? You use stones and blood and other related materials to worship. What is nice about that?
Ameve: What is fetish about it?
Host: Why stones?
A: What has that got to do with you? Do we not have freedom of worship?
H: We do, but how you do it...
A: If I decide to sit by a stone, and slaughter a fowl on it, and get result of what I want, how does it effect you? I have carried my own stone to my house, or to a selected place, and slaughtered a fowl on it, because I want something, and I got that something, and I am satisfied.
H: So to you, the end justifies the means. How you get there should not be anybody's concern.
A: It should not be your concern at all. I have the freedom to do what I am doing. When you sit in your chapel, praying, speaking tongues, shouting, do I come to condemn you?
H: Don't you find anything wrong with it?
A: Do I come to condemn you?
H: No, but if you find something wrong with it you have to condemn it.
A: Why do I condemn somebody's worship? Unless that worship affects me. If it does not affect me, nothing is wrong with it.

(Hot Issues, 10 September 2002)

As in his defence of libation described in the previous chapter, Ameve voiced a modernist idea of religion as confined to the private: everybody has the freedom to do what he likes as long as it doesn't harm anybody else. 'The way I worship is nobody else's concern.' He thus employed a discourse of tolerance as a response to Pentecostals' condemnation of all non-Christian religion and could not be seduced to condemning Pentecostal practices in return.

Clearly, Ameve's debating strategy was also a way of claiming moral superiority over Pentecostalism. As much as the host was clearly posing his questions from a Christian viewpoint, Ameve was also opposing a Christian other. It sometimes looked like he was personally accusing the host of what he accuses the whole Christian society including all the press of. At a certain point the interviewer rightly commented that he hoped Ameve was not aiming at him personally.

Afrikania also finds its way into the media by inviting (and paying) journalists to press conferences on topical issues, to traditional festivals where Afrikania plays a major role, or to newsworthy Afrikania events. It thus has to reframe the movement or ATR in general as news.

In the past Afrikania has organised several press conferences, among others on 'Christian indoctrination in schools' and on the ban on drumming. When in September 2002 a government minister called for the abolishment of libation at state
functions and a hot media debate followed, Afrikania immediately organised a press conference to speak its mind (in chapter 7 I have discussed Ameve’s speech at that occasion). The Sunday before all members were encouraged to show up ‘so that at least our numerical strength will be shown and these people will not shoot and show empty seats.’ For that, Ameve used to complain, is what ‘the media’ always do. Afrikania has a preoccupation with numbers. Angry that ATR is always represented as marginal and with very few adherents, as for example by the (highly contested) population census, Afrikania wants to show that ‘we are many.’ The 1997 Convention of Afrikan Traditional Religion was primarily meant to do just that. Television images of charismatic churches with their masses of people also provide a point of reference for Afrikania’s media representations. Funds were raised from among the members and leaders, because ‘they won’t talk unless you pay them.’ The organiser, Osofo Boakye, explained that

all the newsmen coming should be paid some ‘transport money,’ about 100,000 cedis each (about $12), which is for them personally, not for the station. We call that public relations. If you don’t recognise somebody as PRO [by giving some money], they will not carry your message. If you give them only coke, they will not talk. If you call journalists to come and take your message outside, even for a short news item, you always have to pay them.3

Counting the reporters, camera men, light men, and soundmen of the various radio stations, plus the additional costs, he estimated the total cost of the press conference at about six million cedis (over $700), the bulk of which had to come from Ameve’s pockets. Journalists of two TV stations, four radio stations and four newspapers attended the press conference, filmed, taped, and listened to Ameve’s speech, and asked questions. Afrikania’s antagonistic attitude towards the media and media practitioners described above in the case of Hot Issues was also very clear during this press conference. All the Afrikania people addressed the press as ‘the other,’ as the Christian other. As if they were all the time saying ‘you the Christians,’ assuming all the press is on the Christian side. This is not unfounded of course (see chapter 1), but the tendency was more to oppose the press, as an enemy almost, than to manipulate and make use of the press. They addressed the press in the first place as Christians and only in the second place as professional journalists.

By delivering speeches on press conferences and other occasions, handing out the print version to journalists, and giving interviews, Ameve ties into the press format of structuring news around authoritative statements of Big Men, and the common journalistic practice of getting hold of the printed speech and writing the news story on the basis of that (Hasty 2005). Indeed, when Afrikania enters the news, it is often on the basis of a statement made by Ameve. Newspaper reporters select controversial statements, which may have nothing to do with the occasion where the statement was made, for front page headlines. Thus Ameve reached the front pages with headlines such as ‘Some pastors go to juju’ (Times of 4 April 2002) or ‘Afrikania lashes at Christian leaders: Do these pastors have conscience?’ (Chronicle of 6 April 2002). More ‘neutral’ headlines, such as ‘Afrikania ordains new priests’ (Daily
Graphic of 2 April 2002) or ‘We’ll maintain country’s culture – Afrikania Mission’ (Daily Graphic of 5 October 2002) get much less prominence in terms of page and space allocation and caption font size. Needless to say, what journalists select as most newsworthy is often not what Afrikania wants to publicize in the first place. Examples of such conflicting interests will be given below.

Another way of getting traditional religion in the news is to alert or invite the press to traditional festivals. There is a long tradition in the Ghanaian media of reporting on cultural festivals in the country and the vivid spectacles such festivals often entail make them wanted items for news photography and television. Nevertheless, to ensure television coverage Afrikania sometimes explicitly invites TV stations to festivals where it plays a major role or where Ameve gives a speech, for instance the Bliza (corn) festival in Ameve’s hometown Klikor on 18 August 2001. Again, this invitation involved paying the journalists and organising transport for them. Journalists of TV3, GTV, Radio Ghana, and the Daily Graphic were brought to the spot by Ameve’s driver in an Afrikania vehicle and paid by Kofi Agorsor, an Afrikania priest and professional artist and musician. Three days later the evening news carried a one-minute item on the celebration of the Bliza festival. The Afrikania Mission was not mentioned, nor did Ameve come on the screen. What was shown was the drumming and the dancing, the priestesses with their loads of beads and white patterns painted on their legs and arms, the presentation of corn cobs, and the ritual burial of a live fowl. No attention was paid to the spiritual significance of the festival. Media reports of such events frequently reduce African traditional religion to ‘pomp and pageantry’ and ‘colourful cultural heritage’ and so did this news item. Ameve always complained about this, but Afrikania’s aim of beautifying traditional religion unintentionally connects to or even invites such a media frame. Indeed, it employs very similar formats of spectacle.

In Ghana’s commercial media scene newsworthiness has come to depend to a certain extent on sensation and spectacle. In order to attract journalists to a positive image of traditional religion and to ensure coverage, then, Afrikania stages spectacular performances. In this, it is very particular about beautification. Whereas in its early days, Afrikania’s representational strategies were mainly to talk about ATR as an ideological source, it is now more than ever concerned with public image, with making ATR look nice, clean, and modern ‘to make it attractive to the people.’ The media spectacles that Afrikania stages are not spectacular shrine festivals, but events such as the inauguration of the headquarters, the 20th anniversary, the graduation ceremony for student-priests, or the ordination of priests, exactly the kind of events that charismatic and Pentecostal churches also like to advertise in the media. Let’s recall Afrikania’s 20th anniversary celebrations described in chapter 5 for example. The official opening of the mission’s huge new building with a public durbar and worship service was clearly meant as a spectacle of attraction for an outside public. The anniversary cloth with the mission’s logo, the roadside signboard, the balloon and ribbon decorations, the famous shrine priest sitting in state, the speeches and the dances, and the cutting of the tape got their significance mostly from the presence of press reporters and photographers, radio journalists, and most of all the Ghana Television crew that were to carry the images and the messages to the whole nation. Ameve and other Afrikanians were disappointed, however, at the limited media coverage that was
given to the event. The one-minute news item in the evening news and the small report in the corner of page 23 of the *Daily Graphic* were, according to Ameve, not in relation with the importance of the event, and certainly not in relation with the attention given to much less important events organized by charismatic churches. Moreover, Ameve complained that

Anytime they show our things they don’t show it with happiness. They are forced to show it. So they showed the speeches and what happened alright, but you could see they were forced.

The public ordination of sixty new Afrikania priests and priestesses described in chapter 6 was another ‘public spectacle’ that was primarily geared towards an outside media audience. The crowd of initiates in their spotlessly white uniforms posing and dancing in front of the mission’s equally spotless new story building could, as the organizers hoped, convince the public of the beauty and cleanliness of Afrikania. At the same time, the abundant use of mystical substances had to make the public believe that this nice and neat religion is nevertheless powerful. Unfortunately for the organizers, no television station came to cover the event. The only film cameras present were those of Godwin Azameti, a camera-minded Afrikania member who often records important events for record keeping purposes, and myself. Ameve was very happy to hear then, that my own film recordings of the ordination were to be included in the television documentary TV3 was preparing at that moment (fig. 8.4).

The making of *Insight*

When Kafui Nyaku, a programme producer working with TV3, approached Kofi Ameve about making a TV documentary on Afrikania, Ameve readily agreed despite his bad experiences with ‘misrepresentation’ of ATR by TV3. In Ghana it is often the subjects of TV documentaries (or news items) themselves who ask—and pay—for being documented. In this case, however, the journalist took the initiative, so it meant TV3 was to bear the cost. Moreover, Kafui is an Ewe, just like Ameve and most Afrikania members, and this gave him confidence in the project’s outcome. *Insight* is a weekly half-hour TV documentary series dedicated to various aspects of Ghanaian social and cultural life. Ameve pictured thirty minutes of prime-time television showing nice Afrikania events in Accra and in the rural areas and pro-Afrikania commentators. This must have seemed like a great opportunity thus to boost Afrikania’s public image. But interests differed and control over the images to be broadcast was negotiated between different parties involved in the various shooting sessions organized by Osofo Ameve and Osofo Boakye, Afrikania’s ‘National Organizer.’

First, the crew went to a shrine in Accra, selected by Ameve for its neatness, the Berekusu shrine of Okomfo Boadi Bakan. Osofo Boakye visited her beforehand to inform her that TV3 was coming to film and to ask her what she wanted to show on television. Ameve told me that ‘we will not go and shoot what we want, but ask her what she wants the world to see, whether healing, prayer, sacrifice.’ But the priestess did not want the world to see any of these and only allowed the crew to take rather
static shots of Ameve and her conversing in the waiting area outside the shrine room (fig. 8.1). This greatly disappointed the producer, who had expected much of this session and afterwards told me that ‘it was nothing much after all, the shrine was very neat, nothing like the images we see on TV and in films. They didn’t perform anything.’ Clearly, her expectations were influenced by the dominant images of shrines in Ghanaian films (Meyer 2005a). Interestingly, she was evidently conscious of such influences: she explicitly examines the impact of film on popular ideas by including in her documentary a shrine scene from a Ghanaian video movie and disapproving (in voice-over) of the portrayal of traditional religion in such movies as destructive ‘juju’ and its followers as agents of the Devil. She also used editing to give visual expression to her disappointment at being denied access to ‘the real thing.’ The last scene of the documentary shows Okomfo Bakan entering the waiting hall and disappearing behind the white curtain that closes off the shrine room. While her voice invokes Onyankopon (God), the closed curtain fills the screen. Unintentionally perhaps, Kafui thus extended the priestess’ strategy of performing secrecy so as to suggest something powerful and assert her own authority of having exclusive access to the spiritual power hidden behind the curtain.4

For TV3’s visit to a rural Afrikania branch, Ameve selected the Apertor Eku shrine in the village of Dagbamete (Volta Region), because, as he told me, ‘here we still have traditional religion in its natural form.’ Making use of his personal network in the Volta Region, Afrikania’s ‘outreach program’ has been most successful there and many old shrines, such as the Apetor Eku shrine, are now affiliated to Afrikania. Ameve’s wish to include a rural branch in the documentary has much to do with widespread notions of rural authenticity, the idea that what is far away in the village is ‘more authentic’ than what one finds in the city, where religion and culture have become contaminated by modernity. Afrikania’s techniques for generating authenticity tie into such notions, when it claims that what it does derives from the rural areas where ‘the real thing’ still exists, and discursively and visually refers to such rural places in its public performances and representations. Moreover, it is widely believed that the Ewe people in the Volta Region have access to powerful spirits and ‘medicines,’ and Afrikania exploits such popular stereotypes in its claims to spiritual power.

When the Afrikania leaders, the film crew, and I arrived in Dagbamete after a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Accra, a crowd of people was waiting for us. In front of the camera, Ameve was spectacularly welcomed like a big chief. He walked under a royal umbrella, preceded by women sprinkling water on the dusty ground, and followed by a drumming group and hundreds of cheering and singing people. Shots of this scene were later edited as the opening shots of the documentary. In procession we walked to the shrine, a simple but large, open wooden structure with a low cement

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Fig. 8.1 Osofo Ameve and Osofo Boakye conversing with Okomfo Boadi Bakan at the Berekusu shrine in Accra. Video still taken from TV3 documentary on the Afrikania Mission.
wall all around, several entrances and a corrugated iron roof. Inside the structure
under a canopy stood a kind of altar with bowls, clay mounds, some objects and a lot
of dried blood on it. Before the altar on the ground was another, bigger clay mound,
also with blood on it, and bottles of drink standing by it. This part was clearly much
older than the structure that had been built around it quite recently. Behind the altar
were an office, a store, and a notice board with the programme of the shrine festival
the previous month. Seats were arranged for the important people; all the members of
the shrine were sitting on the ground. When it was announced that nobody may wear
sandals or slippers inside the shrine, Kafui and I took ours off, but the cameramen did
not. Ameve was not expected to take his sandals off because he had ‘every right to
wear sandals.’ He was clearly the big man here. He, his wife, and Osofo Boakye were
seated on luxurious sofas beside the altar and when he was officially welcomed, peo-
ple yelled as if he was a hero. In his speech to the worshippers, in English for the pur-
pose of television and translated into Ewe, he said:

I am happy TV3 is here to cover the activities of the shrine. I thank them for
that. They for some time have not been our friends. Because when they cover
our things, they don’t show them well. But today they are here to cover our
activities for the purpose of a documentary on our religion. I am very happy
about it. They are welcome.

Soon, however, trouble rose about what was to be filmed and what not. As soon as the
ceremony started with the taking of some bowls and objects from the altar and the
arrangement of these beside the clay mound on the ground, the shrine keepers told the
cameraman, to his anger, not to film from this point onwards until they would tell him
to continue. The calling of the deity Apetor Eku with a bell, ‘special prayers,’ and ritu-
als was not to be caught on camera. When the animal sacrifice started, he could film
again, but the altar at the back was not to be filmed and this determined the position
and direction of the camera. The shrine keepers remained constantly busy to prevent
the camera from disturbing Apetor Eku by capturing his dwelling place in its lens.

After a priest poured libation on the altar on the ground, asking Apetor Eku to
accept the offerings, men and women knelted down in half a circle, holding goats and
fowls. Some also brought money or ‘schnapps.’ A microphone passed around for
everybody to announce his or her name and offering. The priests collected all animals
and money and placed them by the altar on the ground. All this could be filmed, even
though it included shrine objects. The problem lay with the high altar under the
canopy. After the deity accepted the fowls and goats, the owners held the animals by
the neck and strangled them to death (fig. 8.2), supported by the bell, singing, and
drumming. As soon as an animal died, the person laid it down, kneeled and touched
the ground with the forehead and elbows. When all animals were dead, the priests
assembled at the altar, cut their throats one by one, and poured their blood over
the ritual objects on the ground, the high altar at the back, and the rest in bowls.
While the animals were carried away, women poured sand on the blood that had
spilled on the ground and started sweeping the floor. The service ended with drum-
ming, dancing, singing, and merrymaking. Afterwards the local Afrikania branch pro-
vided drinks and food to the television crew and the Afrikania leaders from Accra. This sharing of food and drink after the official program had ended recalls the journalistic practice of invited assignments to state functions and forges informal relationships of intimacy, and thus of obligation, between hosts and journalists (Hasty 2005). Also, when departing for Accra, Ameve gave Kafui some cash ‘for transport home.’ Again, this was a token of mutuality.

The third event to be filmed was a Sunday service at the Accra headquarters, something totally different from what had been shown at the rural branch. Modelled after a Catholic mass, it includes no bloody animal sacrifices, no frenzied possession, but is conducted all very orderly and ‘civilized.’ With much drumming and dancing, it is also a very lively event—a good occasion to show the world that Afrikanians are, just like Christians, a happy and dancing crowd, worshipping one supreme God in a nice and modern way. During the Sunday services the weeks before, the coming of the film crew was announced to the members and they were as usual called upon to show up in their numbers to ‘give these TV people no chance to film empty seats to show on TV’ and to mirror the charismatic image of the mass. Indeed, many more people, all dressed in their Sunday best, than usually came to services showed up for the Sunday service that TV3 had come to film. While normally only the officiating priest dresses in the white gown of Afrikania priesthood, now all Afrikania priests wore their white gowns to increase the spectacle of the event.

There was a major problem, however. The TV crew planned the visit during the annual ‘ban on drumming and noisemaking,’ discussed in the previous chapter. During this month of silence the traditional authorities in Accra would not allow drumming and libation, both crucial to Afrikania worship. Afrikania could not of course defy the ban, but neither could it influence the date. As the priests and congregation were waiting for the film crew, Osofo Yaw Oson took the mike and explained what was going to happen.

We are in the ban on drumming and noisemaking by the Ga traditional council. And for that matter our service today will look a bit awkward. There will be no drumming. For the same reason there will be no libation.

A discussion followed about whether to do libation or not. In the end it was decided,
on the advice of an elderly Ga shrine priest, Nii Nabe, that there would be ‘dry libation,’ the motion would be shown, the prayers said, but without water.

The act is what we want to portray, that is how we do our services. We will hold the calabash and whoever will do the libation will just display the action, but we will not drop any drop of water for the purpose.

This underscores my argument that Afrikania is first of all devoted to symbolization of ATR, often at the expense of substance and embodiment. This, I would say, is typical for Afrikania’s predicament in the public sphere.

When the TV3 people finally arrived (two hours late, which was angrily interpreted as a sign that they were not interested), the camera, light and sound were set up and the officiating priest quickly went through the service (figs. 8.5, 8.6). All the usual parts were performed, except the drumming, and thus the dancing. There was still singing, but without the drumming, it was much less lively than usual. The result was a rather dull, spiritless service that lacked the participation and the pleasure of the congregation in the dancing. Libation was indeed done ‘dry,’ with a calabash empty of water, and thus of spiritual meaning. An Ewe shrine priest, Torgbe Kortor, performed it and the camera captured it from below so as not to reveal the empty calabash (fig. 8.3). The ritual Ewe words, mumbled by the elderly priest, lent the act an aura of authenticity. But the fact that the libation prayer could be said at all during this pre-Homowo period, suggests that Afrikania ascribes very little power or sacrality to this ritual speech. Apparently, without water being poured, the words did not disturb the deities’ rest, or indeed may not even have reached them. All in all, the whole service was clearly a show put on for TV.

Interestingly, the documentary producer seemed to take the rituals much more seriously. During the sprinkling of Holy Water on the congregants, she ducked away so as to prevent any drop of water from touching her body. She, as well as the cameramen, all of them Christians, clearly chose to remain outsiders to this event and not to participate in any way.
Negotiating authority

Clearly, the making of a television talk show, a news item, or a documentary involves a negotiation between different people with different interests and different ways of asserting authority. Let me analyse in greater detail how this worked out in the case of the TV3 documentary. Ameve and his assistants, who acted as mediators between the TV crew, the shrines, and the Afrikania congregation, wanted to exploit the opportunity to present a beautiful, positive, and clean image of ATR to the general public, a PR strategy to promote ATR. He thus was rather uncomfortable with the animal sacrifice at the Apertor Eku shrine. Meant to be ‘traditional religion in its natural form,’ it certainly did not fit his ideas about ATR as a ‘modern religion.’ Great was his disappointment when the documentary came out, with the first and larger half of it dedicated solely to the sacrifice. The strangling of the animals and the people bowing down before the dead animals on the dusty floor would only confirm popular stereotypes of traditional religion as dirty, backward and cruel. But he had no control over the final production.6

Ameve also pushed Afrikania, and therefore himself, forward as the representative of all traditional religion in Ghana, a highly contested claim. The fact that TV3 approached him and put him in the position to organize all the shooting events, gave him the opportunity to show the public that the Afrikania Mission is indeed the mouthpiece of traditional religion in Ghana. As the authoritative specialist on traditional religion and culture, he received the film crew in his spacious office on the first floor of the Afrikania headquarters for an interview on camera, in which he explained the ins and outs of ATR. What he did not know, however, was that, apart from him, other knowledgeable specialists were also included as authoritative voices. In the whole organization of the making of the documentary, Ameve also tried to re-establish his relationship with TV3 at the same time as strengthening his relationships with shrines. The whole event in Dagbamete seemed very much geared towards welcoming and honoring the great leader from Accra. Unfortunately for Ameve, however, the documentary eventually introduced the Afrikania Mission and him only very late. To the viewer, the Apertor Eku shrine that came first had nothing to do with Afrikania at all. Instead, the documentary commented that Afrikania ‘finds it difficult mobilizing people already in the

Fig. 8.4 Video shot of the Afrikania priests ordination ceremony, used in TV3 documentary on the Afrikania Mission.
practice of traditional religion; most traditional priests are suspicious of them.’

The TV3 producer Kafui Nyaku, herself a Catholic, wanted to give a ‘neutral’ impression of the survival of African traditional religion in these times of Christian dominance and thus to show whatever was going on. She did not mind visiting shrines for this documentary. She thought it could not affect her, because she does not believe in the power of divinities and she did not go there with bad intentions or feelings towards traditional religion. She did pray to Jesus about it though and hoped...
that she did nothing wrong to insult the divinities. She said she is ‘just neutral’ and
‘respects the shrine adherents.’ She was also critical of popular condemnation of tra-
ditional religion and expressed this in her documentary with voice-over comments
like

This aspect [of sacrifice] of the religion is condemned and termed as backward
by this modern era of religious fanaticism. Unfortunately, when people talk
about traditional religion, they ignore the faith and rather talk about these sac-
rifices.

She concluded with the statement that

People like Okomfo Bakan remind us that African traditional religion is still
with us. It is therefore important for people with different beliefs to accept
them and not ignorantly condemn their practices.

Kafui thus underlined her authority as the maker of the documentary by making clear
that her representation of the subject is not distorted by any personal, religiously
inspired aversion against it, neither by personal involvement.

Being ‘neutral’ meant not only being value-free with respect to the subject, but
also not accepting gifts from any party. After the Sunday service in Accra, Ameve
wanted to give Kafui some money, but she did not accept it, telling Ameve that it is
against her ethics. Later in the car she explained to me:

We have this culture in Ghana that people give journalists money for the work
they do. But I am not going to make a pro-Afrikania documentary and that is
what he expects when he gives me money. I want to remain neutral and I can’t when I would accept money.

She did accept his ‘transport money,’ however. Her idea was to make two films out of the material: a neutral one for TV3 and a pro-Afrikania one, for which Ameve, Kafui hoped, would pay millions of cedis. Unfortunately, shortly after the TV3 documentary came out, Ameve died and was succeeded by a much less wealthy man.

The objectives of the TV station as a whole had to do with credibility. Private TV stations in Ghana are still very young and thus still have to prove themselves. They have to cope with an image of being primarily commercial and therefore not responsible and objective enough. Credibility is especially important with the authoritative genre of the documentary. Unlike fiction film, the documentary genre is concerned with representing reality, in particular with providing insight (hence TV3’s documentary series’ title) into an aspect of reality. Embedded in the genre is the claim that a documentary depiction of the world is factual and truthful. In the documentary on Afrikania, several techniques were used to enhance its credibility. First, voice-over narration, characteristic of the expository documentary mode, was used to anchor meaning and construct authority (Nichols 1991). An authoritative voice frames, explains, and clarifies what the audience sees, translates the subject matter to a lay audience.

Decoupling voice from person reinforces the impression of objectivity: one hears a voice, but does not see the person that speaks. In this case, the producer herself recorded the voice-over. It is this ‘Voice of God’ commentary from an all-knowing, all-seeing viewpoint that aligns the expository documentary with investigative journalism (Beattie 2004). While one sees images of the sacrifice at the shrine, for instance, the voice-over explains that ‘most religions believe in various forms of sacrifice; in traditional religion sacrifices are made to atone for sins, or in approval of an answered prayer’ and that ‘their belief is that God forgives those who confess their sins in public and offer a feast in atonement. This is the reason why birds and animals are sacrificed.’

A second strategy involves drawing upon diverse ‘authoritative voices’ that affirm both objectivity and expertise. Short interviews with ‘specialists’ were included in the documentary, answering questions about and giving their informed view on African traditional religion. Afrikania was not involved in the selection of ‘specialists.’ Instead of being presented as the authoritative expert on traditional religion, Ameve thus became one among others: Dr. Akrong at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana; Alhaji Sule Mumuni of the Religions Department of the University of Ghana; the Methodist Archbishop Asante-Antwi; the Catholic Archbishop Sarpong; and Dr. Dartey Kumordzi of the traditionalist Hu-Yaweh Foundation.

The other side of the coin of professed objectivity is the construction of otherness. As the voice-over makes clear, the documentary on Afrikania is about ‘them,’ not about ‘us.’ This ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy is characteristic of the tradition of the ethnographic film (and of classical ethnography in general), but, interestingly, also characterizes much of Ghanaian private media production on traditional culture, that tends to exoticise ‘African culture and traditional religion.’ Partly, this may be due to the fact that the private broadcast media, much more than the public ones, tend to
copy foreign programme formats and modes of representation, including modes of
representing 'African culture.' CNN and BBC documentaries about 'disappearing cul-
tures in the far corners of the globe' provide a point of reference for local document-
ary makers. But it also has to do with the Christian bias of the Ghanaian media and
the Christian background of most media professionals. They tend to represent a tradi-
tionalist Other in opposition to a Christian Self. The framing of the documentary nar-
rative binds the makers and the spectators in an implicitly Christian 'Us,' gazing at the
non-Christian Other. As with classic ethnographic filmmakers and their subjects, the
relation between the makers and subjects of the Afrikania documentary, between
observers and observed, is an unequal looking relation. The people behind the camera
use the power of vision and 'insight' to represent and explain the people in front of it,
to whom they clearly do not and do not want to belong. The documentary thus shows
how the frames and formats of classical expository ethnographic film, including its
construction of otherness, map onto the dominant Ghanaian framework of thinking
about religion in terms of modern Christianity versus traditional African religion.

Despite its claims to credibility and neutrality, as a commercial station, TV3 is
also concerned with ratings, and thus with attracting and binding viewers, targeted
primarily among the urban and predominantly Christian population of Southern
Ghana. Thus, in the selection of shots in the editing phase, the audience's satisfaction
in seeing stereotypes confirmed also counted. The unfamiliar, almost repulsive images
of the animal sacrifice resonate with the spectacularisation of the rural, non-Christian
Other in much of Ghana's visual popular culture.

Both Afrikania's concern with showing the polished beauty of ATR to the pub-
lic and TV3's concern with providing insight clashed with the concerns of the shrine
priests and priestesses that Afrikania asked to participate, especially Okomfo Bakan,
the priestess in Accra. Initially, she did not see the benefit of the documentary and was
reluctant to receive the TV crew at her shrine. Ameve managed to convince her to par-
ticipate, but rather than promoting her practices to an outside public, she was con-
cerned with concealing as much as possible. The priests and shrine keepers of the
Afrikania branch in Dagbamete were equally concerned with keeping the camera
away from the divinity, although they allowed the crew to film certain rituals and per-
formances. The performance of secrecy is a way of asserting power. In African tradi-
tional religions, spiritual authority is achieved by elaborate processes of initiation into
the spiritual 'secrets' of a shrine. Access to religious knowledge in traditional cults is
thus restricted, and this is the power base of religious specialists. Moreover, access to
the spaces in which spiritual power is dealt with, is equally restricted. Healing or con-
sultation sessions usually take place in seclusion on a one-to-one basis, often at night,
while many rituals of spiritual communication are performed in secret rooms where
nobody but the priest may enter. This concealment of spiritual practice and knowl-
edge is partly the outcome of a long history of suppression and attempts at eradicat-
cation, culminating in the current Pentecostal hostility against traditional religious prac-
titioners and places. But it also has to do with the structures of authority of African
cults and shrines. This restriction on vision and knowledge, then, makes the represen-
tation of African traditional religiosity through the medium of television film prob-
lematic.
Spectacles of otherness, spectacles of evil

In chapter 6 I discussed Afrikania’s techniques of authentication, whereby its claims to spiritual power are legitimised by posing as Christianity’s other. I argued that Afrikania thus appropriates stereotypical representations of traditional spirituality. In this section I will discuss three media events that point to the risk involved in this strategy: spectacles of otherness easily become spectacles of evil.

Human vultures

From November 2002 to February 2003 a remarkable story appeared in several tabloids. Under the front page heading ‘Two men turn into vulture in juju money ritual,’ The Gossip reported the mysterious disappearance of two young men in Abossey Okai, Accra (fig. 8.8). The two spare parts dealers had been missing for about a week when an ‘anonymous, but reliable source’ from the neighbourhood tipped the reporter that the two had visited a ‘juju man’ around the time of their disappearance. It turned out that in order to acquire ‘juju money’ (sika duro) and get rich quickly, they had had themselves turned into vultures by the ‘juju man’ (The Spectator published the same story in February 2003 in a slightly different version and reported that the two men had travelled to a juju man in Benin for the purpose). But unfortunately, when the juju man had gone to town to buy some medicines to turn the two businessmen back to their human shape, he was knocked down by a vehicle and died. ‘As a result, the two businessmen are still lurking around as vulture and,’ the story ended, ‘none of his assistants is powerful enough to transform the human-turned-vulture back to normal life.’

A lot could be said about this story, but what interests us here is that after the publication (and its remediation on several FM stations) a reporter from The Spectator approached Ameve for his comments on the story. Although neither Afrikania nor any of the individual members had anything to do with the story, Ameve invited the reporter to a Sunday service at Arts Centre, where he integrated the press interview in the service and involved the members present to talk about the case. A surprising move, considering Ameve’s fierce critique of this kind of sensationalist portrayal of ATR as ‘juju.’ Instead of brushing the story aside as cheap fiction, he took the story seriously in front of the reporter and even claimed to have a solution for the thorny situation in which the two spare parts dealers now found themselves.

The next Saturday The Spectator devoted almost its entire front page to the bold headline ‘Hope for the human vultures … Okomfo to intervene’ and a picture of two vultures sitting on a roof with the caption ‘the two human-turned into vultures.’ The head of the story read as follows:

The possibility of human beings turning into vultures has been confirmed by the leader of the Africania Mission and another religious leader. In the opinion of Osofo Okomfo Kofi Ameve of Africania Mission, people can be turned into vultures and could be brought back to human form. The well-known traditional priest, therefore, declared that the Africania Mission was capable of trans-
forming the two men believed to have been recently turned into vultures in Benin, back to human form, free of charge if indeed the story was true. He demanded that the two vultures should be trapped and brought to the Mission to be transformed into humans (The Spectator, Saturday 8 March 2003).

Ameve took up an interesting position regarding ‘juju’ here. By claiming that Afrikania would be capable to counter ‘juju,’ he twisted the public’s association of traditional religion with ‘juju.’ The story continued with an example given by Ameve of a vulture turned human during a traditional drumming and dancing session and Ameve’s digressions about the beneficial power of witchcraft. After Ameve’s view representing traditional religion, the report also gave ‘the Christian’ and ‘the Muslim’ view on the case, citing a Pentecostal pastor who said that it is possible to turn human beings into vultures and an imam denouncing this kind of beliefs as contradicting the very principle of Islam.

From what we have seen in chapter 6, we might expect that the portrayal of Ameve as a ‘well-known traditional priest,’ claiming ‘the means and the power to turn them back into normal human beings,’ would not go uncontested by initiated shrine priests. Unfortunately, this happened just before I left Accra and I have hardly been able to follow up on the aftermath of the publication. Neither have I heard Ameve’s
Fig. 8.9 Part of poster-calendar titled 'Beckley’s Juju: Seeing is Believing.'
reaction. In any case, what struck me was that Ameve totally went along with the very mode of representing ATR that I had so often heard him complain about. Confronted with the risk of Afrikania’s modernisation of ATR becoming spiritually unsubstantial, or, to be more precise, of appearing powerless to the public, Ameve explicitly claimed that Afrikania had access to spiritual power. The media frames available to make such claims public, however, do exactly what Ameve opposes: they reduce traditional religion to spectacular magic employed to transform humans, get rich quickly, or, most dramatically, to destroy and to kill. Indeed, I later heard that when Ameve died, several media connected his sudden death to his interference in the vulture case and suggested that his mingling into juju matters might have evoked the wrath of the spirits involved or of other, more powerful juju men, who then killed him by spiritual means. What is important to stress here, then, is that while Afrikania’s public claims to spiritual power may seem ‘mere’ representations when observed from within the movement, they may resonate with very real experiences of and beliefs about spiritual power on the part of the public. In other words, what for Afrikania leaders is just an image or a performance, may become a threatening presence for spectators. Images of otherness may become a touch of evil. This was also clear in the following case, which involved the physical destruction of such threatening images.

‘Beckley’s juju: seeing is believing!’
Another story that kept the tabloids busy for months was the case of Dr. Beckley, whom we encountered at the very beginning of this thesis. Unlike in the cases of the human vultures and the three debates on ‘culture’ discussed in the previous chapter, Afrikania was extremely reluctant to speak out on this case, for reasons that have to do with the nature of the debate, or perhaps better, public scandal. It provides a telling example of the dilemmas involved in Afrikania’s strategies of media representation.

Dr. Beckley is a famous Ghanaian ‘occultist’ and medical doctor who was arrested and saw his house and shrine destroyed by a mob in April 2002, after he was accused of abducting a tomato seller and binding her to a tree on his compound. Following the incident, a media scandal evolved and created a lot of negative publicity for traditional religious practice in general. But instead of focusing on the proceedings of the court case and on what actually happened – it turned out that there was no evidence and eventually Dr. Beckley was discharged without any reason given for his initial arrest – all the tabloids carried front page stories about and pictures of Beckley’s occult practices and allegations of sales of human blood and use of human parts for rituals (fig. 8.11).9 Within days poster-calendars appeared with titles such as ‘Beckley’s Juju: Seeing is Believing’ and ‘Beckley’s evil deeds exposed’ and pictures showing all kinds of ‘fetishes,’ statues of the gods in his shrine, his ‘flying coffin,’ a ‘victim’s skull,’ and other frightening things allegedly used in his spiritual practices (fig. 8.9). A picture of a young girl with a text balloon reading ‘Jesus saved me’ reveals the Pentecostal framing of the case. The same poster, however, also contains a critique on ‘false prophets’: a picture of ‘Beckley alias Ghana Bin Laden’ with the text ‘I have helped many pastors’ and another picture showing ‘Beckley in a Handshake with a Pastor Client to the Shrine’ (fig. 8.10). On the street corners where such posters were
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for sale, people gathered around them to look at the images as a source of news. Many people are fascinated with such dark and evil powers and visualisations of it are highly attractive. Moreover, they confirm people’s belief in the power of traditional priests and ‘occultists’ and of Dr. Beckley specifically. As he himself put it in an interview with me,

The media are just interested in sensation, not in reporting or even discovering the truth. [...] The media are trying to destroy me, but they have rather made me even more popular. They have made me a popular and well known personality in Ghana and abroad.10

This kind of images dominates public imagery of traditional religion and, although not directly produced by churches, but rather by some clever enterprising Nigerian guys, ties into widely broadcast Pentecostal-charismatic conceptions of traditional religion as satanic. As the relation between vision and belief is strong (see the poster title ‘seeing is believing’),11 it highly influences many people’s perceptions and fear of and hostility towards all traditional religion and its adherents.

After his court case Dr. Beckley joined Afrikania (through Hunua Akakpo) and was made a prominent member. He was frequently invited to speak during Sunday services, which he attended with his wife. Moreover, he was given the opportunity to continue his spiritual practice in a vacant room next to that where Osofo Fiakpui and Torgbe Kortor gave spiritual consultation. I visited him in the empty room, where he sat behind a desk with a burning candle and some divination cowries on it, smoking incessantly. He told me that he was trained as a medical doctor in Europe, went into ‘occultism’ in various shrines in Ghana, and travelled to India to study spiritual methods there. He applied both orthodox European medicine and various methods of spiritual healing, both African and Indian. The people who came to him for consultation at the Afrikania Mission were new clients altogether, most of them referred to him by Ameve.

For some time Dr. Beckley’s coming to Afrikania went unnoticed by the press, until Afrikania’s press conference on libation. When after the official part the present journalists discovered that Dr. Beckley was present (apparently they had initially not even recognised him in his ‘civilised’ outfit) and ready to talk to the press, they
flocked around him with their mikes, cameras, recorders, and note books to catch his words and pose their questions one after the other. Ameve got little attention. The press was more interested in Beckley’s sensational story than in the more political and much less spicy debate about libation. And indeed, Dr. Beckley made the headlines in the newspapers the following days with the statement that he would demand reparation from the government. Afrikania’s opinion on the issue of libation at public func-

Fig. 8.11 Front page of Love & Life of 5 - 11 May 2002.
tions disappeared to the background. Some newspapers and radio stations did not even mention it at all, much to the anger of Ameve, who had spent so much money and energy on the press conference. It is clear that Ameve’s attempt to exploit Dr. Beckley’s celebrity and reputation as a powerful occultist by welcoming him and granting him prominence, be it reluctantly, worked out wrongly. Due to Beckley’s presence, Ameve could not escape the very media framing of traditional religion in the sensationalist idiom of evil that he tried to counter.

What Dr. Beckley’s case made clear is that as much as the media can create popularity and celebrity, so do they create negative popularity, antiheros. Moreover, the commercialisation of a sensationalist image of traditional religion as the ultimate evil (and interestingly, globalised images of evil such as Osama Bin Laden are quickly adopted into this) forms part of the commercialisation of the Pentecostal-charismatic dualism of God and the Devil, visualised in artistic expressions produced for the market, like paintings, posters and calendars, and video films. That the representation of Christianity’s enemies, whether in images or in words, is commercially viable also becomes clear from the following example.

‘Christianity under attack’

Towards the end of my fieldwork period I became the subject of my own investigation in a not very pleasant, but telling way. A friend alerted me to the front page article of the Chronicle, one of the national dailies, of Saturday 8 February 2003. Under the...
screaming headline ‘Christian philosophy under attack. “Jesus is not the only way”,’ I was presented as an Afrikania priestess attacking Christianity (fig. 8.12). What had happened was that I had been present at a ‘graduation ceremony’ for future Afrikania priests and priestesses marking the end of their course in ATR. The Afrikania leadership wanted the event to get public attention and had invited the press. One of the reporters that had turned up asked me whether I was one of the graduating priestesses. Apparently he saw that I knew the graduates and, looking for a scoop, thought he had a good story for his paper: a white Afrikania priestess. I had to disappoint him and told him about my research. He got interested, or at least so he seemed, and wanted to ask me some questions about my research findings. This he did and I told him something about the dynamics between traditional religion and Christianity and about their respective relation to the media. His last ‘by-the-way’ question was to which religion I adhered myself, whether I was a Christian or not. While I thought that this had nothing to do with my research findings and should not be of his concern, after asking so many people about their religious convictions, I also felt obliged to answer and told him that I do not belong to any religion by birth, that I believe in what may be called God, but that I am not a Christian. ‘Why?’, he asked. ‘Because I cannot believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and that’s what Christians have to believe, isn’t it?’ The reporter was satisfied and went on to transform my personal disbelief into an attack on Christian philosophy in bold front page capitals, and, disregarding of what I had told him, substantiated this attack with the claim that I, a student of the University of Amsterdam, Marleen de Witte or Adwoa Agyapomaa (the name I am often called by in Ghana), was among the thirty-five graduating Afrikania priests and priestesses.

Of course, after spending almost a year building relations of trust with pastors and members of various Christian churches I was troubled. I had always been honest to them about my own religious background (or the lack of it) as well as about my research on the Afrikania Mission, but none of them of course knew me as a radical anti-Christian Afrikania priestess. I worried most about what Otabil would think, so I visited him in his office to get things straight. He had seen the Chronicle, so he told me, but he already knew that I had been lured into a trap by the reporter. As a public personality he knew very well how the Ghanaian media, and perhaps the media anywhere, worked. He told me not to worry about my reputation, because every well-thinking person knows this. Although Otabil’s reaction reassured me, I still worried about what my other informants would think of me. I impossibly could visit all of them in the two weeks left before my departure. Unfortunately, my repeated visits to the Chronicle office in an effort to have a rejoinder published on the front page proved fruitless.12 Yet, the incident is telling not only of the ineffectiveness of some media regulations in practice, in this case the entitlement of a person written about to publication of a rejoinder, but also of the difficult relation between traditional religion and the Christian dominated media. Just as in Dr. Beckley’s case, the media eagerly present traditionalists, or perceived traditionalists, as the enemies of Christianity, often in a sensation-seeking way. Such a story on the front page sells well. Indeed, that Saturday’s Chronicle was sold out quickly, as I discovered when I tried to buy some extra copies for myself.
Of course I also spoke to Ameve about the publication. Even though the story incorrectly presented me as an Afrikania priestess, this did not bother him at all. On the contrary, it pleased him, as ordaining me as a priestess was exactly what he had wanted to do on an earlier occasion at the beginning of my stay. I had declined, but now at last Afrikania got front page attention for having a Dutch lady among its priesthood. Ameve did not mind the fact that this ‘news’ pushed to the background what he had initially wanted the press to report on, the graduation of Afrikania priests and priestesses and, by extension, the successful functioning of his school for traditional religion. Nothing of the speech that he had delivered (and handed out in print), in which he explicitly stated that ‘our goal is not to attack other religions’ and adopted his usual discourse of tolerance, appeared in the story. Attack is newsworthy, tolerance is not. But what counted for Ameve was that Afrikania had reached the front page. What this case again highlights, then, is the very limited influence Afrikania has on what is represented in the media and how this is represented. In the end that is determined not by Afrikania’s interests, but by the professional and commercial motives of journalists, that is, by what makes a good story, what sells well, or whether there are more newsworthy events going on that attract a newspaper’s or broadcasting station’s human and technical resources. And that again is connected to much broader societal dynamics, to political and economic developments and to inter-religious relationships, all of which reflect in the media field.

Conclusion: formats, technologies, and spirit power

To understand the encounter between African religiosity and audiovisual media technology, I have proposed to analyse the relationship between the formats and technologies of media representation and the specificities of religious mediation. Compared to charismatic-Pentecostal TV programs, which, as argued in chapter 4, may mediate an experience of ‘Holy Ghost power,’ Afrikania’s media representations lack much of what occupies the religious practitioners they claim to represent: spirit power. Local divinities seem to refuse to operate through modern media. This has to do with the TV formats available to Afrikania, which hardly leave room for spirituality. They are in the first place informative formats, not meant to invite participation in religious practice, as do Christian broadcasts, but to convey information about it. Such framings fit Afrikania’s intellectualist approach. But they are also formats of ‘othering.’ They are about them and what they believe and do, making it hard for Afrikania to counter popular stereotypes.

The absence of spirit power from Afrikania’s media representations also has to do with Afrikania’s difficult position in between the public sphere and the shrines and the negotiation about revelation and concealment. Afrikania’s concern with cleanliness, beauty and visual attraction conflicts with, for example, the spiritual power of animal blood used in rituals. Both Afrikania’s aims and project and the dominant formats of televisual mediation clash with the formats of religious practice in shrines. In the first place, spiritual power and authority thrive on secrecy, concealment, and the restriction of religious knowledge. But it is also the particular aesthetics of shrines that makes televisual representation problematic. In the secret places where ‘the real thing’
is, there is usually not much more to see than some mounds covered with dry blood and hardly identifiable objects, black pots, stones, or at best carved figurines (figs. 8.13, 8.14). These do not so much represent particular deities, but rather present them. They make them present in the space of the shrine and enable the shrine priest to communicate with them and deal with their power. The dominant formats of spiritual mediation in shrines, then, are not modes of visual attraction, of spectacle, of mass address. As such they are not aesthetically fit for television formats aimed at seducing people and drawing them in, formats of which charismatic churches make ample use. As we have seen, the aesthetics of shrines and traditional religious practice are fit for television, however, as a ‘spectacle of otherness’ in a documentary format or in Ghanaian movies. But this was not as a spectacle of beauty and attraction as Afrikania would like to see. Moreover, spectacles of otherness risk being perceived as spectacles of evil.

So much for formats of mediation. There is also something about the relation between audiovisual technologies and spiritual power that complicates its media representation. The problem is not that spiritual power cannot be mediated by modern media technologies. On the contrary: the very reason that certain places and activities connected with the presence of spirits may not be filmed is that the camera is believed actually to be able to catch a spirit and take it away. Such beliefs tie into ‘the logic of sympathetic magic that conflates signifier and signified’ (Spyer 2001:308). When photography was introduced in West Africa, some people feared that the camera would steal their souls. Several ‘spiritualists’ explained to me how they would use a person’s
photograph to spiritually heal or harm the person depicted over a long distance (Behrend 2003). None of them used video for this purpose, but one said it could be possible if only you use the right words. In the case of the TV3 documentary, filming a divinity’s dwelling place would disturb it and interfere with its operation. Hence also the stories of videographers and photographers who did try to capture secret places and mysteriously found their cameras not functioning, or the images not appearing (cf. Spyer 2001). Similar claims to the unrepresentability of the sacred concern sound. Sacred events would often not only entail restrictions on taking images, but also on sound recording. Unauthorized recording of sacred sounds (ritual speech, music) would similarly result in malfunctioning of recording equipment. Conversely, a clear sound recording would, as a photograph or film, be interpreted as proof of the deities’ permission to represent. There seems to be something about the interaction between audio and visual technology, the body and spirits that is beyond human control.

In the above examples, the power of vision and of hearing is closely connected to spiritual power. Images and sounds are not separated from spirits by a relation of referentiality, but connected by a relation of presentationality. Visual representation can acquire power of its own and seeing it can affect the seer. An image does not represent spiritual power, but makes it present (Behrend 2003; Meyer 2005a). In other words, the image is iconic rather than symbolic; it does not symbolize, but it embodies the spiritual reality behind it. The same, I would argue, counts for sound. Ritual speech or drumming does not refer to the power of deities, but embodies their power and may thus affect the hearer. Interestingly, then, charismatic-Pentecostal looking and hearing practices, in which images and sounds can transfer the power of the Holy Spirit to the viewer (De Witte 2005; Gordon and Hancock 2005), show a continuity with traditional African ideas about seeing, hearing and spiritual power. The difference is that in charismatic Pentecostalism every believer is able and expected to access the power of the Holy Spirit personally, and thus its mass mediation is encouraged. By contrast, in traditional religions access to the powers of particular divinities is restricted to initiated religious specialists, whose authority depends on their exclusive access to these powers. By preventing outsiders from taking shots or recording the sounds of powerful places and events, then, shrine priests and priestesses protect their control over the spiritual power they work with and depend on for their living. Documentary makers’ efforts of giving the general public insight into traditional religious practices by audiovisually representing them, clash with shrine priests’ efforts at keeping these practices invisible and inaudible in order to prevent such images and sounds from transmitting the power they embody, through the camera, the television screen, and the loudspeakers, to the wrong people in the wrong, non-ritual contexts. The struggle over the eye, the ear, and their technological extensions thus becomes a struggle over the control of spiritual power.

The question of how to represent spiritual power in the media occupies many religious groups seeking media access, but the question of the very representability of the sacred seems to be especially pressing for African traditional religion. Patricia Spyer has argued with regard to the Aruese sacred event of the Cassowary’s annual play that a resistance to being reproduced by cameras is ‘tantamount to the ideological rejection of truth, transparency, enlightenment, or, in short, modernity’ (2001:307),
and thus a way of escaping the repressive power of modern technological means. At
the same time, however, this refusal of photography goes hand in hand with a desire
for mechanical, serial reproduction. African traditionalists face a similar challenge in
this era of mass-mediated religion. The big question for the Afrikania Mission is how
to make use of the new media opportunities and technologies to participate in the
religious public sphere and ‘modernizing’ traditional religion without losing the very
ground on which the power of traditional religion stands, that is, secrecy, invisibility,
and opacity. This is a challenge that the Afrikania Mission has up till now hardly been
able to meet.

Notes to chapter 8

1 In communication theory and sociology, framing is a process of selective control over the individ-
ual’s perception of media, public, or private communication. Framing defines how an element of rhet-
oric is packaged so as to allow certain interpretations and rule out others. Media frames can be cre-
ated by the mass media or by specific political or social movements or organizations. The concept is
generally attributed to the work of Erving Goffman, especially his 1974 book, Frame analysis: An
essay on the organization of experience.
2 Interview 21 November 2002.
3 Interview 9 September 2002.
4 See Van de Port (2006) for a discussion of the performance of secrecy in Candomblé and the visual
representation of this in film.
5 To test the sacrifice, the animals were taken one by one, made to touch the sacrificer’s back and
head and laid down over and over until they did not stand up again, a sign of being accepted by the
deity. One fowl was not accepted and was given back to the woman. It was said that she had caused
an abortion to the anger of the deity.
6 When I talked about the documentary with Ameve’s successor Atsu Kove, he expressed a very dif-
ferent opinion: ‘Me I don’t mind the blood sacrifice. That is what the people saw. So they must show
it. Me I don’t mind. They can say what they want to say. That is what we are doing. You don’t have
to hide it. If you hide that side and the people come and find out themselves it is not fine. Show
them everything’ (17 March 2005).
7 Kafui’s interest in traditional religion as expressed in her documentary exemplifies an approach to
traditional religion that remains somewhat underemphasised in this thesis. While focussing on the
relationship between the Pentecostal and the traditionalist points of view, I leave an alternative
standpoint out of account. For Kafui, as for a large group of people of various religious back-
grounds, traditional religion is by far not as problematic as for most Pentecostals. Although they do
not adhere to it, they respect it as any other religion and may indeed be interested in it intellectually
without fear of getting involved or being affected.
8 I am referring here to the older expository style of ethnographic filmmaking, in which the
Afrikania documentary seems to fit best. There are other modes, however, that explicitly question
this relationship through reflexive and collaborative modes of documentary (Beattie 2004).
9 Beckley himself told me that he suspected the government to be behind his arrest: ‘If a government
is good, then I help them spiritually, but if a government is bad and against human good, then I
work against them. That is the case with Ayadema, so he hates me. Ayadema is a good friend of
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Kufour, so now they work together to eliminate me, together with an influence from Benin. The government is behind my arrest and the whole case, of course’ (Interview 5 December 2002). This statement also confirms what I noted in chapter 7, that politics in Ghana is tied up with spiritual powers and practices. These hardly appear in the open registers of the public sphere, but in the more hidden registers, and surface only in the format of rumour. See Ellis and Ter Haar (2004) on the significance of such rumour.

10 Interview 5 December 2002. As described in the opening vignette of the introduction to this thesis, the recording of this interview was ‘mysteriously’ erased from the disc. Quotations given here were retrieved from memory one week after the interview was held and may not be verbatim.

11 See also Meyer’s example of a person who referred to video films in trying to prove that witchcraft is real (Meyer 2005a).

12 Mrs. Apostle Addae Mensah, whose picture was accidentally published with the story, did succeed in having a rejoinder published.