

Article

The Africanization of Catholicism in Ghana: From Inculturation to Pentecostalization

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Abstract: This article discusses the Africanization of Catholicism in Ghana as a process that embraces activities deriving from the inculturation doctrine as well as those emerging during the most recent process of pentecostalization. The complex and changing historical and current discourses on “African tradition”, “traditional religion”, and “African spirituality” are presented in relation to the creation of an independent Ghana and the state-instigated concept of “national heritage”, as well as the Catholic theological developments strongly shaped by the Second Vatican Council. The influences of Pentecostal and charismatic Churches are described and the pentecostalization of Catholicism is interpreted as a kind of subversive development of inculturation doctrine and practices. The article refers to the material and embodied aspects of religion, pointing to the importance of material culture and “embodied continuation” in shaping contemporary African Christian and African Catholic identities. The article draws on ethnographic material collected in Catholic parishes in central Ghana.

Keywords: Roman Catholic Church; Ghana; Africanization of Christianity; inculturation; pentecostalization; material religion; *adinkra* symbols; Corpus Christi



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1. Introduction

In 2010, when my ethnographic research dedicated to African lived Catholicism in Ghana was still in its early stages, I asked one of the Ghanaian Roman Catholic priests, who was then a lecturer in a theological seminary in the northern part of the country and had spent a few years in Europe, to comment on the specificity of African Catholic religiosity. His remarks can be seen not only as a scholarly reflection but also as a significant identity statement relating to contemporary post-missionary African Catholicism. According to him:

Africa is offering its own distinctive view to the Catholic Church. It is related to ways of being a Christian. Liturgical innovations taking place here show that there is more than one way of celebrating Eucharist. The general patterns are the same, but Africans would say it is important to celebrate according to the spirit of the people. And the way we do it in Africa is according to our spirit. In terms of music, in terms of body movements, in terms of emotions. . . When you are here and you enter the church you see something different [than in Europe]. You see that the liturgy is not absolutely solemn. Our liturgy sometimes seems to turn towards chaos; there is not much order. But that is the way people here celebrate things. Just in liturgy we show our culture. (Interview, 21 January 2010)

These few sentences emphasize the sensual, practiced, and embodied aspects of religion in Africa. Using these sentences as an inspirational starting point, I propose to approach the Africanization of Catholicism in Ghana as a process that embraces activities deriving from the inculturation doctrine as well as those emerging during the more recent process of pentecostalization. Both inculturation and pentecostalization should be perceived as strongly referring to the concept of “African spirituality”. While in the historical missionary context “African spirituality” was seen as dangerous, evil, and connected

with “paganism” (see [Premawardhana 2020](#), p. 7), in the 20th century late missionary and post-missionary Catholic discourses inspired by the Second Vatican Council “African spirituality” has received rather positive connotations, which refer to the concept of a specific continental heritage. In this vein, during a Mass that inaugurated the Second Special Synod of bishops for Africa in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI recalled “the spiritual and cultural” inheritance of Africa, emphasizing that the continent “constitutes an immense spiritual ‘lung’ for a humanity” ([Benedict XVI 2009b](#)). From the Vatican’s perspective, the current religious involvement and vivid religiosity of many Africans are perceived as a precious continuation of a specific “African way” and are often juxtaposed with “Western secularization”. From the perspective of African Catholics, references to the continental spiritual past through concepts of “tradition” and “heritage” lean towards the culturalization of pre-Christian indigenous religions, possibly depriving them of the “demonic” status, which, as mentioned above, had been ascribed to them by various missionary Christian discourses ([Meyer 1999; 2010](#), p. 10). The emphasis on a specific “spiritual” continuity—even if understood rather selectively and framed within a universalizing Christian perspective—is seen as recognizing and encouraging the development of local pathways, which could link contemporary Catholic practices with African identities.

This article—when discussing the Africanization of Catholicism in Ghana through inculturation and pentecostalization—relates to an ongoing scholarly debate about the complex and multilayered relationships between religious processes and heritage-making (see [Meyer and de Witte 2013; Isnart and Cerezales 2020](#)). Through inculturation, Ghanaian Catholicism incorporated some elements of the postcolonial national heritage project into the framework of its religious practices. Paradoxically, the state-steered dereligionization of “tradition” helped the Church to enforce a *religious* (Christian) experience among its faithful. Material elements seen as “traditional” appeared in church interiors and on vestments, while “African” corporeal practices (dancing, clapping, singing) started forming an integral part of newly designed liturgies. In many cases, inculturation has enabled Ghanaian Catholics to feel “at home” in the Church as both Christians and Africans. “Traditional” symbols have provided a familiar vocabulary to fill in the Catholic grammar in a meaningful and experiential way (see [Mayblin et al. 2017](#), p. 8).

Interestingly, the more recent pentecostalization of Catholicism also refers to “tradition” and “African heritage”, especially when bodily involvement and corporeal religious practices are being endorsed as rooted in indigenous conceptualizations of spirituality. However, pentecostalization poses numerous questions about the entangled and paradoxical relationships between “African” and “Christian” worldviews. On one hand, the broader Pentecostal current firmly calls for a “break with the past”. On the other hand, treating “traditional beliefs” seriously confirms their spiritual powers and continued liveliness. In its Catholic version, pentecostalization can be seen as a specific and quite subversive development of inculturation where “African spirituality” is treated not so much as a reservoir of “cultural” or “traditional” forms, but rather as a powerful living resource to which contemporary Africans have direct access as its inheritors.

To understand these currents, I will first present a historical outline of Roman Catholicism in Ghana. I will then introduce the post-colonial heritage discourses and the national and religious debates concerning “tradition” that have influenced Catholic inculturation and pentecostalization. In the last part of the article, I will focus on the Ghanaian celebrations of the Corpus Christi feast. Throughout the whole article, apart from referring to theological and political discourses, I propose to emphasize the material dimension of Catholicism. Following the material turn in the anthropological study of religion, I understand materiality not as a mere representation of religious beliefs and ideas but rather as a crucial form *in* and *through* which religion is established in people’s lives and experiences ([Morgan 2010](#), p. 8). The material approach “takes the body, sensations, objects, images, and rituals seriously as authorized harbingers that convey to believers a sense of divine presence, making God real” ([Meyer 2017](#), p. 311). The Africanization of Catholicism happens *in* and *through* particular church buildings, performative rituals, material

objects, and people's bodies, which are involved in specific sensational forms "that make the transcendental sense-able" (Meyer 2006, p. 9).

With this in mind, I will describe examples of materiality and sensational forms connected with the inculturation and pentecostalization of Catholicism, often drawing on my own ethnographic research conducted in the Roman Catholic parishes in central Ghana. My scholarly involvement in Ghana has been long-standing as the first part of my ethnographic research (9 months in total) was undertaken between 2009 and 2013 in the Brong-Ahafo region (today this area belongs to the Bono East administrative region, established in 2019) and was dedicated to studies of lived Catholicism in one of the newly created Roman Catholic parishes (see Niedźwiedź 2015). Further returns to the same area (in 2016), including my recent and ongoing project (started in 2020), which focuses on the position of Catholic women in Ghanaian Roman Catholic parishes, have enabled me to build a long-standing relationship with people who form Catholic communities in two towns and surrounding villages. My fieldwork has been based on participant observation and observant participation, ethnographic interviews, and everyday informal interactions. It has been conducted from the position of a European, non-religiously involved, woman anthropologist. The ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse population of Bono East region is a good representation of contemporary Ghanaian society, especially those living outside the big metropolitan centers such as Accra or Kumasi.

2. (Trans)Forming Ghanaian Catholicism

According to the 2021 national census, 10% of the Ghanaian population declared a religious affiliation with Catholicism¹. This makes the Roman Catholic Church the second-largest Christian denomination in the country (after the Church of Pentecost) and the biggest among the so-called historic missionary churches². The history of Catholicism in Ghana demonstrates the transformation typical of the region where "one of the principal struggles of West African Christians was to take a European-introduced tradition and reshape it into something where West Africans could feel spiritually at home" (Baum 2016, p. 80). I will briefly present this trajectory to show how a global denomination, brought by white missionaries and seeded during the colonial period, developed its Ghanaian and African identities, and what role inculturation and pentecostalization have played in this process.

2.1. Early Stages

Even though the presence of Catholic priests in what is now Ghana was recorded as early as 1482 (Mawusi 2009, p. 32), initial contacts with indigenous people were very limited as these first clergymen acted mostly as chaplains in the Portuguese seaside forts and castles (Elsbernd 2000, p. 2). The few Catholic proselytizing attempts in the coastal area (mostly around the European fort at Elmina) were associated with periodic activities by Augustinians during the 1570s, as well as the Capuchins and Dominicans in the second half of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century (Obeng 1996, pp. 96–98). After these not-very-successful Catholic endeavors (e.g., the Augustinian mission ended with the killing of the monks by local people, see Elsbernd 2000, p. 2), the main wave of missionary Christianity in the Gold Coast was associated with the arrival of various Protestant missions during the 18th and 19th centuries. The churches, which were officially established by these missions, today compose mainline Protestant denominations in Ghana, i.e., Methodist, Presbyterian, Evangelical Presbyterian, and Anglican.

The real birth of Ghanaian Catholicism is usually associated with the year 1880 and the arrival of two French missionaries from the Society of African Missions of Lyon (Obeng 1996, p. 104). Catholicism spread across the southern part of the country and in 1908, the first Catholic mission was established in Kumasi (the capital of the Asante). In 1906, a very different area of today's Ghana—at that time known as the Northern Territories within the British protectorate—witnessed the arrival of three White Fathers who began proselytizing among the Dagaaba, Frafra, and Kassena people. During the first half of the

20th century, the Roman Catholic Church in the Gold Coast saw the development of an organizational structure supported by the Vatican through the creation of vicariates and the nominations of the first bishops (with European origins).

2.2. Independent Ghana and Post-Conciliar Church

From the mid-20th century, the gradual transformation of Christianity from a “white man’s faith” to a religion contextualized by various ethnic groups inhabiting the Gold Coast accelerated in all the missionary Churches (see [Sundkler and Steed 2000](#), p. 944; [Hastings 1994](#), p. 605). This movement coincided with the political changes that led to an independent Ghana in 1957. In the case of Catholicism, its institutional development involved the transformation in 1950 of the vicariates into three dioceses (in Accra, Kumasi, and Tamale)³ and the establishment of an archdiocese in Cape Coast. In 1960 the Ghanaian priest, John Kodwo Amissah, became the Catholic archbishop of Cape Coast, while Peter Poreku Dery, from northern Ghana, was ordained as the Catholic bishop of Wa. These appointments of Ghanaians not only signaled changing leadership within the global and national Church but also brought the first significant liturgical changes in Ghana. Approximately two years before the Second Vatican Council began, Bishop Dery asked Pope John XXIII for official ecclesiastical consent to introduce the Dagaare language and music into the liturgy performed across his diocese within the northwestern region of Ghana. When permission was granted, Dery himself composed the Dagaare Mass, which included music based on local traditional songs, the use of drums and xylophones (originally connected with traditional rituals), and the corporeal holistic involvement of the people participating in the service through dancing and rhythmic bodily expressions ([Tengan 2013](#), p. 23).

The official post-conciliar liturgical reforms introduced globally in 1969, as well as changing attitudes towards African “traditions”, opened all the Ghanaian Catholic dioceses for liturgical experimentation. Importantly, this change in religious practice was visible and experiential for all members of the Catholic congregations. Despite the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, the liturgical transformation helped to empower a number of lay leaders (e.g., catechists, choirmasters, and prayer-group organizers) and even regular Church members by encouraging them to look for new material and corporeal religious forms such as individual dancing styles. The natural reservoir for these bodily and material expressions was provided by cultural traditions, familiar to the faithful from different ethnic groups, as well as by the state-promoted image of African and national heritage.

At a theological level, this development went hand in hand with the popularization of the idea of “inculturation”. As Ludovic Lado has pointed out, since the 1970s “the discourse of inculturation [...] has dominated theological debates in Africa Catholicism” ([Lado 2017](#), p. 227). The concept was coined in Roman Catholic missiological circles during the 1960s as an attempt to describe interactions between “Christianity” and “indigenous cultures” in new ways. It was supposed to depart from openly paternalizing concepts of “adaptation” or “accommodation” by emphasizing, instead, the possibility of mutual encounter (see [Kirby 2012](#), p. 8, endnote 2; [Majawa 2016](#), p. 214). “Inculturation signals respect for customs and teachings considered to be aspects of Eternal Truth, even if foreign to the Christian tradition” ([Premawardhana 2020](#), p. 6). The concept also refers to the central Christian doctrine of Christ’s incarnation—the embodiment of the divine in human flesh and the material world. *Ad gentes divinitus*—the Second Vatican Council decree on missionary activity—turned attention towards the cultural context of incarnation. The decree declared that through incarnation, Christ bound himself “to certain social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt” (*Ad gentes* 1965, para. 10). Thus, as developed in further Church documents (see [John Paul II 1995](#); [Benedict XVI 2009a](#)) and inculturation debates on African Catholicism, “incarnation signals the Church’s willingness to immerse itself in African cultures, taking upon itself idioms, symbols, concepts, and other elements previously deemed foreign if not heathen” ([Premawardhana 2020](#), p. 6).

These reformulations were signs of a new postcolonial attitude emerging within the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, which embraced new discourses that appreciated indigenous traditions and heritages. In Ghana, the most influential promoter of inculturation theory and practice has probably been Peter Kwasi Sarpong, a former bishop (since 1970) and archbishop (2002–2008) of Kumasi. Although he has now formally retired, he is still publicly active and publishes extensively on various topics related mostly to theology as well as Akan traditions and other African cultural contexts (Sarpong holds a PhD in social anthropology). In the 1970s he was a leading figure in the Africanization of the liturgy and the promotion of a new material culture within Ghanaian Catholicism. This culture incorporated Asante symbols of royal power (stools, umbrellas, swords), traditional clothes (*kente* materials), interior design (*adinkra* symbols⁴) as well as body movements (dances), and other corporeal expressions (taking off sandals during worship, an expressive style of speaking, clapping) (see Obeng 1996) (Figures 1 and 2). Inculturation became the most characteristic feature of Catholicism in Ghana and other Sub-Saharan African countries, being inseparably tied to the debate about the Africanization of Christianity.



Figure 1. Dagaaba dances in the Catholic parish in central Ghana. Two dancers on the left are wearing *adinkra* clothes with the *Gye Nyame* symbol. Photo by the author, December 2010.



Figure 2. Shoes left in front of the Eucharistic chapel by members of the Catholic Women’s Association in Kintampo. Photo by the author, February 2023.

2.3. Charismatic Movements

Nonetheless, some anthropologists and anthropologically oriented researchers point to an implicitly paternalistic attitude towards “African culture” embedded in the inculturation paradigm. Lado, for instance, argues that in the end, it promotes a rather essentializing concept of “Africanness” and tends to operate within an authorized, top-down, selective, and value-laden modalities (Lado 2009, pp. 181–203; see also Lado 2017). In his own ethnographic research, Lado studies what he calls “experiments of inculturation” (Lado 2017, p. 227), looking at the bottom-up, experiential and practice-based activities of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Cameroon. His analysis of the Charismatic group, Ephphata, through the concept of hybridity, reveals tensions associated with an official and controlling theological understanding of inculturation. However, as he points out, “at the grassroots level the local production of Christianity is a continuous phenomenon” (Lado 2017, p. 235) and hybrid religious forms such as rituals combining local and Catholic patterns of healing are very popular and successful in charismatic spirituality.

Lado’s research in Cameroon encouraged me to consider the development of similar charismatic Catholic groups and movements in various African countries as a specific prolongation and quite a subversive bottom-up development of the inculturation paradigm. Additionally, the charismatic Catholic currents should be also seen as reflecting a much broader religious transformation connected with the general pentecostalization of Christianity in Africa. In the Ghanaian case, this turn towards pentecostalization is usually associated with the 1990s—a decade that saw the rapid advance of Charismatic Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, some of which were initiated or influenced by global institutions and movements. Nevertheless, many scholars suggest that “Pentecostalism in Ghana had an indigenous origin” (Amanor 2004, p. 12) and is strictly connected with the specificity of African Christianity and its historical development.

Clearly, the pentecostalization of Ghanaian Christianity should be seen from a historical perspective that dates back to the first half of the 20th century and the emergence

of African Initiated Churches (in Ghana a good example might be the Musama Disco Christo Church, which started around 1923) as well as indigenous prophetic movements such as those led by prophet William Wadé Harris or Sampson Oppong (see [Amanor 2004](#); [Asamoah-Gyadu 2013](#), p. 11). These and later Pentecostal movements share some general characteristic features. Pentecostalization is usually associated with an emphasis on healing and deliverance, practical and pragmatic attitudes towards peoples' needs, a holistic understanding of human aspirations and sufferings (prosperity or sickness are understood as both physical and spiritual in nature), a turn towards the Holy Spirit, and a personalized relationship with Christ. During the course of the 20th century, Pentecostal and charismatic Churches came to be so successful that in the end, they influenced historic missionary Churches ([Asamoah-Gyadu 2013](#), p. 13). They also added a new understanding to the concept of "African Christianity" which, in various denominational contexts, started to be strongly associated with a Pentecostal style of worship and its specific corporeality and materiality (see [Lindhardt 2014](#), p. 22).

Even though the Roman Catholic Charismatic renewal movement in Ghana emerged during the early 1970s ([Omenyo 2011](#), p. 241), the broader pentecostalization of Ghanaian Catholicism developed around the turn of the millennium. Significantly, the demand for charismatic Catholic movements and an openness to their spirituality and worship during the late 20th century was mostly expressed by a new generation of Ghanaian priests, as well as by lay people who started organizing charismatic groups on the ground, without always receiving support and understanding from the parish clergy and the local Church hierarchy (I will address this in the final part of this article).

Hence, Ghanaian Catholicism went through a transformation that reflects both global developments of Catholicism, including those related to the Second Vatican Council, and changes specifically connected to Africa, especially to the postcolonial realities of African societies. Since the mid-20th century, the Africanization of the Roman Catholic Church has developed as a twofold process. It involved a change in religious personnel and the gradual replacement of missionary clergy and bishops with Africans⁵. This process was combined with the institutional development of the Church at both continental and national levels, which began during the 1950s with the creation of African episcopates ([Sundkler and Steed 2000](#), p. 632). Africanization also referred to the lived religious experiences and spiritual imaginaries of the African people who, in a new postcolonial era, were supposed to be members of the global Catholic Church *as* Africans and members of independent nation-states. Inculturation was supposed to be a theological answer to this new situation but it was also an inspiration for liturgical experimentation and the creation of a new material culture of African Catholicism. Pentecostalization, on the other hand, is a more recent development that has emerged in the broader context of African Christianity and has complemented and widened the Catholic understanding of Africanization. In terms of material Catholicism, it has popularized intense body-involving spiritual practices and their recognition as an "African style" of worship strongly connected with contemporary African-Christian identity.

3. Returning to the Roots

3.1. National Heritage Project

The transformation of discourses concerning African "tradition", "culture", and "heritage", which has been observable within the Catholic domain since the second half of the twentieth century, to a certain extent echoes broader debates on postcolonial African identity. In Ghana, these debates were very strongly influenced by official state policies that advocated the search for a new postcolonial national and continental identity. Kwame Nkrumah, the first leader of an independent Ghana (1957–1966), developed the philosophy of the "African personality" and promoted "returning to the roots" through rediscovering "authentic" African heritage, which was to be drawn from a mythologized precolonial "past" ([Meyer 2010](#); [de Witte 2018](#), p. 186; [Woets 2018](#), p. 222; [Shramm 2000](#), p. 340). The material representation of these discourses became an Akan *adinkra* symbol—Sankofa—which

depicts a bird who, while moving forward, is turning backward to pick up something precious that was forgotten (de Witte 2018, p. 188). Sankofa started to be interpreted as a call to “return to the roots” and was promoted at a national level⁶. Numerous other *adinkra* symbols were also popularized all over the country as expressions of “Ghanaian heritage”. There was an attempt to promote the sharing of this heritage emotionally and aesthetically by the ethnically and religiously diverse citizens of postcolonial Ghana.

Even though *adinkra* symbols were connected with the Akan (and specifically Asante) ethnic identity, they gained significant national recognition and popularity in various parts of the country. However, they are especially admired in southern and central Ghana. Historically, they appeared as stamped prints on clothes used during funeral ceremonies but in independent Ghana “*adinkra* cloths” became popularized as machine-printed materials, so-called “African wax prints”, or modern tie-and-dyes. They also became common as decorative elements on royal regalia, buildings, posters, and jewelry. Each *adinkra* symbol has a specific name that denotes an exact Akan proverb or saying (Fisher 1998, p. 54). *Adinkra* designs refer then to the broader concept of “African wisdom” preserved not in scripture and books but through visual symbols that serve as complex metaphors which, in traditional contexts, were interpreted through orally transmitted expressions. The elevation of *adinkra* symbols into the status of national heritage could be seen as an appreciation of oral knowledge production and transmission that is structurally different from colonially implemented European ideals of education.

Creating a specific reservoir of the Ghanaian culture, Nkrumah incorporated numerous other Akan artifacts, especially those connected with traditional chieftaincy systems and traditional religions, into a postcolonial state symbolism (see Senah 2013, p. 352). This representational imagery of a new country included material objects, e.g., the state presidential stool, a state sword and a state umbrella, royal cloths (*kente* material), as well as the official establishment of state linguist and performative acts such as the pouring libation ritual performed during various state ceremonies (see Hess 2001, p. 65). The ideology of Sankofaism further developed as a national heritage project, especially during the Jerry J. Rawlings military era (1981–1992), through the extensive state promotion of performative, corporeal, and material dimensions of what was seen and defined as Ghanaian and African heritage (de Witte 2018). Marleen de Witte points out that during the 1960s as well as during the 1980s waves of state Sankofaism, a very strong emphasis was put on music and dance. She suggests that these elements were instrumental in creating “a sense of African identity and unity among Ghana’s citizens” (p. 188) as they own a special “affective power” (p. 189) and ability “to connect people on the level of embodied experience” (p. 188).

3.2. Sankofaism Catholic-Style

Comparing the timeline of the state policy of Sankofaism with the post-Second Vatican Council transformations of the Catholic discourses and practices, we notice an almost parallel process of the culturalization and heritagization of pre-Christian and pre-colonial religious beliefs, customs, and practices. Presumably, national discourses on postcolonial African identity put their stamp on religious Catholic practices in Ghana simply because they created a mental environment in which activities and symbols up to then seen as “pagan”, “demonic”, and “unmodern” received a new positive evaluation. Framing elements of “traditional religions” as “tradition” or “heritage” also deprived them of immediate “religious” connotations and eased their entrance into the Catholic milieu. The acceptance of traditional music, instruments, dances, costumes, symbols, and practices in the Catholic liturgies and services in Ghana (and to a certain extent in other historical mission churches) resonated well with an official state-promoted heritage project (see Meyer 2010, p. 11).

Some elements promoted by the state and elevated as “national heritage” were also relatively quickly adopted by the Roman Catholic Church as part of an inculturation process. A good example might be the popularization of *adinkra* symbols in the Catholic context and their theological reinterpretation. *Adinkra* symbols combine material visual form with—as already mentioned above—references to African knowledge and indigenous

traditional wisdom. While graphic representations of the symbols are relatively fixed and canonical, there is a big potential for processing them through various material forms: as patterns printed on cotton clothes, painted on building walls, or carved as wooden sculptures or small pendants worn as necklaces (Figure 3). Their material flexibility makes them easily transferable and applicable in various situations and contexts. State Sankofaism used this aspect of *adinkra* symbols to reproduce and popularize them in Ghana. A similar strategy can be observed in the inculturation activities of the Roman Catholic Church, which embraced and adopted *adinkra* symbols as part of traditional heritage and African culture.



Figure 3. A young Frafra woman praying during Sunday service at the Assemblies of God in Sirigu in northern Ghana. She is wearing a necklace with the traditional Akan *adinkra* symbol *Gye Nyame*. Photo by the author, February 2013.

The *adinkra* cloth design, for instance, is based on repetitive black patterns printed on a white background. As already mentioned, these cloths were traditionally linked with the opulent Akan funerals. Nowadays, ceremonial clothes for men, female dresses, and *akataso* (pieces of cloth used by women as a wrapper) made from manufactured *adinkra* materials are very popular during funeral celebrations, especially in southern and central Ghana. Interestingly, in the Catholic context, they might appear as cloths worn during some phases of a funeral ritual to emphasize the Christian identity of their wearers. For instance, if a deceased person was Catholic, the usual practice would be to organize a Catholic burial service led by a parish priest or a catechist. In central Ghana, where I conducted most of my research, on the day of the burial, members of the deceased person's extended family as well as other mourners usually conform to Akan tradition and wear black and/or red dresses and clothes. However, some members of the Catholic parish, especially those connected with the deceased person as "brothers" and "sisters" from the same prayer group, choir, or religious society might wear white and black clothes with *adinkra*-patterned materials. Ideally, they should be identical to emphasize group solidarity. Appearing in white clothes with *adinkra* patterns during a burial ceremony is interpreted as a manifestation of the Christian belief in an afterlife and the resurrection of the body. Here, the white color represents the Akan traditional funeral color triad: red, black, and white (de Witte 2001, p. 25) but it also shows an association with Christian robes (connected with baptism, liturgical albs, or popular images of charismatic prophets). This Christian connotation is particularly visible if the chosen printed pattern is *Gye Nyame*—an *adinkra* symbol known as "Except God".

During my research I saw that Catholic groups wearing *adinkra* clothes on the day of the burial often behaved in a distinctive way, somehow enacting a Christian message of hope and belief in the resurrection. For instance, during the ritual laments and traditional dirges performed by the family members when the body is put in the coffin, the group would sing Catholic songs, sometimes dancing and clapping as if outshouting the disturbing voices of wailing mourners. Similarly, this group would often lead a funeral procession dancing along and singing resurrection songs on the way to the burial site (Figure 4). *Adinkra* clothes or similar white clothes, used rather distinctively and only by a small group of people on the day of burial, are the most common dress codes for the following day, which preferably is a Sunday. Traditionally, this day is associated with the celebration of the life of the deceased person. In the Christian context, the day begins with a thanksgiving service organized in the church where the departed worshipped during his/her life. For this celebration, all the extended family members are expected to wear identical attire (see de Witte 2001, p. 150). The most common are *adinkra* clothes or other white materials with black printed patterns that are newer variations based on *adinkra*. Catholic families might carefully select this funeral cloth design to combine references to traditional celebrations of life with their Christian beliefs.

The Roman Catholic Church developed its own interpretation of selected *adinkra* symbols, combining their traditional Akan meanings and associated proverbs with theological explanations and exact Bible quotes. In 1976 the Catholic Book Centre in Accra published a small booklet titled *Adinkra Oration* (Christian 1976) in which visual representations of *adinkra* symbols are presented with explanations of their "traditional Ashanti meaning and symbolism, and biblical extracts which express the same sentiments and evocation" (Christian 1976, p. 4). A symbol opening the *Adinkra Oration* is *Gye Nyame*—"Except God, I fear none" and interpreted through a quote from Ecclesiastes 1: 8. *Nyame*, which is the name for God in Akan traditional beliefs, is easily referred to as the Judeo-Christian God-Creator (Ossom-Batsa and Apaah 2018, p. 273). Such a direct translation makes this *adinkra* symbol the most commonly used in the Catholic context and very popular in various inculturation projects. Peter Kwasi Sarpong incorporated it into his episcopal coat of arms when he was appointed as the bishop of the Kumasi diocese (Obeng 1996, p. 120).



Figure 4. Catholic parishioners leading a funeral procession in Paninamisa, central Ghana. Photo by the author, January 2010.

Today, *Gye Nyame* can be spotted as part of the interior design in many Ghanaian Catholic churches, including the most prestigious ones. It appears, for example, on the walls of the Holy Spirit Cathedral in Accra (Figure 5) and in colored windows in St Peter's Cathedral in Kumasi. The Franciscan church in Sunyani was constructed between 1999 and 2003 in a new style that does not follow earlier typical European models with their rectangular floor plan. Its round structure is a reference to sacred sites associated with African traditional religions and the idea of communal sitting in a circle; it also incorporates the *Gye Nyame* symbol at its center. The base of the main altar has a *Gye Nyame* built into it in a way that makes the light shine through from the back, accentuating its shape (Figure 6). A magnificent crucifix visually dominates in the background, referring to the Catholic interpretation of the *adinkra* symbol where "*Nyame* (God) of the Akan is the creator and redeemer of the world, who reveals himself in Jesus Christ" (Ossom-Batsa and Apaah 2018, p. 273). The 1976 publication also listed other *adinkra* symbols popularized extensively in the Catholic context as decorative elements in church interiors, embroideries on liturgical vestments, or patterns printed on religious leaflets. Interestingly, the Sankofa symbol—emblematic of the state-promoted "return to tradition" current—in the Catholic *Adinkra oration* is depicted in its alternative version: not as a bird turning back but as variations in the shape similar to the European symbol of a heart. It is interpreted as "For that which is past, Is a strengthening experience, which guides me now" and through references to Ecclesiastes 1:9–10, 4 which emphasize the value of continuity.



Figure 5. *Adinkra* symbols in the Roman Catholic cathedral in Accra. Photo by the author, February 2013.

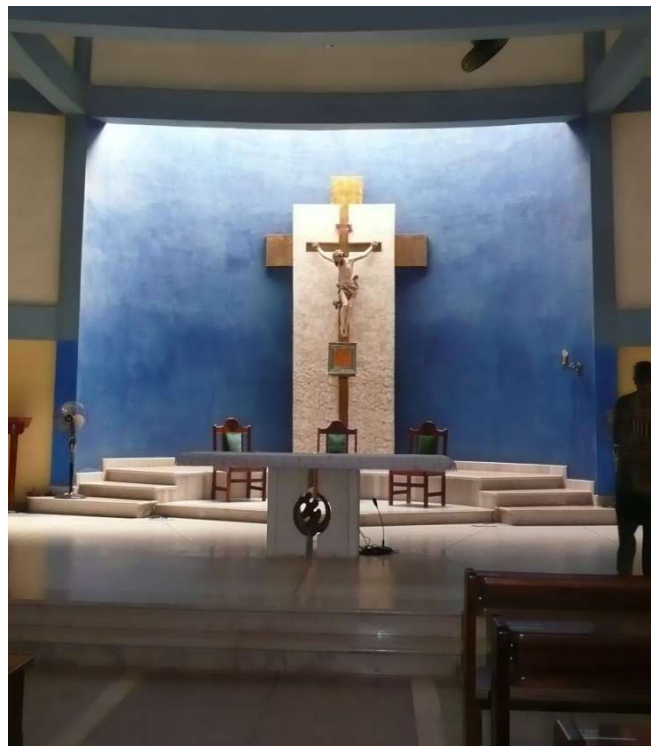


Figure 6. The *adinkra* symbol *Gye Nyame* built into the stone altar base in a church in Sunyani. Photo by the author, December 2009.

The popularization of *adinkra* symbols in the Catholic context contributed to the successful formation of a new Africanized material culture of Catholicism in Ghana after the Second Vatican Council. The use of selected *adinkra* symbols in church interiors has allowed Catholics not only to refer to traditional and national symbolism but also to embrace meaningful and visually attractive elements in their religious material design without attracting accusations of idolatry, which in Ghana's multid denominational society tends to appear in discussions about the Catholic cult of images (see [Niedźwiedź 2012](#), p. 156). Visual but non-figurative representations of indigenous knowledge, reinterpreted in a Christian way, have the potential to function as a counterpart to classic Catholic iconography, which is usually associated with the European missionary transfer of symbols from a knowledgeable "center" to supposedly ignorant "peripheries". The inculturation of *adinkra* designs into a Catholic setting refers to a feeling of pride and concepts of African identity and personality, which were also crucial in the national heritage project of Sankofaism. This inspiration from Sankofaism is also visible in the popularization in the Catholic context of numerous artifacts, symbols, and ritual gestures connected with chieftaincy (umbrellas, stools, drums, *kente* cloths). The inculturation projects included them as parts of the liturgy, sometimes presenting the bishop or priest as a religious leader similar to a traditional chief (see [Obeng 1996](#), p. 121), but more often associating them with the figure of Christ the King ([Obeng 1996](#), p. 8) (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The statue of Christ in front of the Kumasi cathedral. Christ is depicted under the chief umbrella and standing on an Akan stool. Photo by the author, August 2009.

3.3. African Tradition, Pentecostal Spirituality

This intriguing and subtle interconnection between the state Sankofaism and Catholic inculturation does not mean that both institutions consciously collaborated on the development of a heritagized version of Ghanaian traditional symbols and religions. Their

agendas were actually quite divergent and even at times conflicting. This is clearly visible in Nkrumah's instrumentalization of traditional religious language and symbolism for creating the Ghanaian nation as well as in defining his leadership as *Osagyefo*—a Redeemer (Asamoah-Gyadu 2014, p. 166). The latter practice was a direct link to the figure of Christ and was widely criticized by various Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic. For Nkrumah, who as pointed out by Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu “took a hostile socialist approach to religion” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2014, p. 165), religions were basically sources of powerful symbols and material culture that could help him form a postcolonial modern African society. In that sense, his cultural policy towards African traditional religion could be seen as a “despiritualization” or a national appropriation—similar to the use of the title of “Redeemer” in the context of Christianity. However, at the same time, the Roman Catholic Church conformed to the state-initiated culturalization of the traditional religion and benefited from the national project, incorporating heritagized traditional religious symbols in its agenda of Africanizing Catholicism within the framework of inculturation. An even more complex example involves the 1990s wave of Sankofaism during the Rawlings era when an attempt to transform African traditional religion into one of the “world religions” was taken up by a former Catholic priest through the Afrikania Mission (de Witte 2009). This institutionalization was positively recognized and supported by the state, which also continued to develop the heritagization of African traditional religion through various cultural projects all over the country, extensively involving schools and other educational institutions.

However, in the late 1980s, public contestations and criticisms of Sankofa ideology were developed by Pentecostal Christians whose numbers grew significantly during this time (de Witte and Meyer 2012, p. 49) and accelerated after the 1992 democratic and capitalist transition. The 1980s and the 1990s criticism of Sankofaism came from the religious and spiritual core of Pentecostal Christianity because charismatic Churches saw the incorporation of African traditional religious symbols in a state and national culture as a spiritual danger. Similar criticisms were directed towards the inculturation projects promoted by the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike a rather inclusive Catholic soteriology that suits the inculturation project, an exclusive soteriology emphasizes differences and a need for change. One of the Pentecostal ideological pillars is to “break with the past” and be “born again” as a new Christian. From this point of view traditional religion, even in its culturalized form, was seen as still powerful and defined as Satanic—a possible source of personal but also national problems which, according to the Pentecostal logic, were usually interpreted as spiritual.

On the one hand, then, the pentecostalization of Christianity in the 1990s revived the spiritual status of African traditional religion and tensions between what can be defined as “traditional” and “Christian” worldviews. On the other hand, however, it generated a new concept of African culture and African spirituality that started to be seen as Pentecostal culture and Pentecostal spirituality. Paradoxically, its strong embrace of physically involving, ecstatic religious practices came to be associated with sensational forms seen as “traditional” that include, for instance, effervescent dancing, speaking in spiritual language, spiritual dreaming and visions, foretelling, and healing rituals. In my view, despite the official Pentecostal discourses emphasizing “a break with the past”, on the level of physical, lived, and material practice pentecostalization provides many African Christians with an “embodied continuity” that grounds Christianity in a locally recognized religious “style” and habitus. The “embodied continuity” is usually non-verbalized and non-discursive but performed *in* and *through* bodily practices.

These aspects are important for understanding a further change within the Catholic Church and other missionary churches at the end of the 20th century when they more eagerly embraced the Pentecostal/charismatic style of worship by incorporating it into their projects of Africanization of Christianity. As mentioned earlier, in the case of Catholicism, the increase in charismatic spirituality with its corporeal and emotional mode of worship can be interpreted as a kind of subversive development within an inculturation project.

This development supplements Africanization with charismatic spirituality and thereby reformulates inculturation in more revolutionary and bottom-up ways than was done by the post-conciliar Church.

4. Corpus Christi

4.1. Dancing for the King

One of the most successful examples of Catholic inculturation in Ghana is the annual celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi. In the Roman Catholic calendar the “Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ” (in short, Corpus Christi) is a moveable feast observed on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, i.e., the first Sunday after Pentecost⁷. In Ghana, however, this period of the year (late May and June) is the culmination of the rainy season, when rainfall is intense and people in rural areas are busy working on their farms. Consequently, in most dioceses, parish priests are allowed to decide whether to celebrate Corpus Christi at another time, such as the Feast of Christ the King, which takes place on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, i.e., before Advent. Such a solution seems more convenient from a practical point of view, as the celebration then falls in late November, which is the dry season, and in most parts of Ghana a period right after harvest.

In central Ghana, the New Yam festivals, which signal the first harvests of fresh yams, are celebrated with much pomp between October and November in numerous towns and villages. These cultural festivals, which are strongly connected with the annual rural calendar as well as traditional religion and spiritual powers embodied in figures of Akan chiefs, are very important for understanding how the Catholic feast of Corpus Christi is celebrated. The climax of both celebrations involves a public procession during which an exuberant crowd sings, plays music, beats drums, and dances while a ceremonial royal canopy is vigorously hoisted up and down. In the case of the Yam Festival, under this canopy people carry a local chief in the palanquin (Figure 8), while during the Corpus Christi celebration, a gilt monstrance containing the Eucharist is carried on a decorative platform (Figure 9). The links between the Akan chief and the Eucharist, which in the Catholic understanding involves the *real* presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine, are even more visible when we realize that two English words, king and chief, in Twi have only one lexical equivalent. The Twi word *ɔhene* (pl. *ahene*) is translated as “king” or “chief”, so for many Ghanaians, when they express themselves in English, the two terms have rather interchangeable meanings. The Catholic Feast of Christ the King is, then, the feast of Christ-*ɔhene*, which can be translated as both King and/or Chief.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that the theological Catholic concept of transubstantiation can be very abstract for many Ghanaian Catholics, mostly because its material and ritual realizations are rather distant from their social and cultural realities. The white wafer and bread are not well-grounded conceptualizations in Ghana as they do not bring associations with local common staple foods and crops. Actually, yams celebrated during the Yam Festivals are traditionally seen as sacred gifts connected with the spiritual power of a chief and the fertility of the earth that is linked to the ancestors. Additionally, the Catholic understanding of the sacraments and the highly controlled distribution of the Eucharist mean that many parishioners have limited access to Communion. From what I could observe during my fieldwork, this causes some tensions and divisions within Catholic communities and parishes. The restricted distribution of Communion works against the logic of a “communal” generously shared meal, which is very deeply embedded in Ghanaian cultural tradition (see [Asamoah-Gyadu 2010](#), pp. 57–59).



Figure 8. A procession carrying the chief during the Yam Festival in Jema. Photo by the author, November 2010.



Figure 9. Corpus Christi procession in Jema. Photo by the author, November 2010.

The symbolic correlation between the Eucharistic procession and the Yam Festival rituals, which is very clear especially when Corpus Christi is celebrated on the date of

the Christ the King, has the potential to make the Eucharist and the figure of Christ more concrete through their association with the culturally close figure of a traditional chief/king. The procession embraces communicant and non-communicant Catholics as fully active participants who celebrate around the publicly exhibited and ceremonially transported Eucharist. What is more, the procession—performed in an exuberant style connected with intense bodily engagement and dancing—is seen by Ghanaians as a familiar and typically local festival. Many times, when discussing the Corpus Christi procession with members of Catholic parishes, I heard direct comparisons to the processions and parades connected with traditional feasts and rulers. For instance, Rose, a chorister in the Catholic church in central Ghana and an owner of a small shop (which she named “The Lord is good. Psalm 91.”), explained:

Here people carry their kings/chiefs [Twi *ahene*] on their arms and shoulders around the town. [...] We carry Christ himself. It is God that we worship. And as people carry their kings, why cannot we carry our Lord? The one who is supreme king over everything. And during this procession I can pray, I can use this means of prayer and say my intentions to God. For example, some time ago we went to K. [a bigger town nearby]. And I was not feeling well, my body was not feeling well. But my colleagues [from the choir] forced me to go and join them during the procession in K. And I took part in it. I sang and danced. So, at the end of the procession I was ok. There is a belief that it is important for us to have this program. As traditionalists carry their kings/chiefs. (Interview, 18 January 2013)

The material and multisensorial dimension of the Corpus Christi procession not only refers to more globally spread Catholic patterns of walking in processions but also engages numerous sensational forms and physical objects directly borrowed from Ghanaian Yam Festivals and other traditional celebrations. They include ecstatic dancing, the waving of white kerchiefs and raising hands in specific finger gestures used to praise the Eucharist in a form similar to gestures praising chiefs when they appear publicly, ceremonial drums, and traditional music performed simultaneously by various ethnic groups that—often in fervent movements—surround the platform with the monstrance and circle it. The platform itself, usually covered with *kente* cloth, resembles the royal palanquins used for the transportation of chiefs during Yam Festivals.

When, in 2010, I participated in the Corpus Christi procession in a young parish that did not have its own canopy, the church elders borrowed the huge ceremonial red parasol-canopy from the chief’s palace, explaining that the platform with the Eucharist, like the palanquin with a chief, also needs to appear publicly under the canopy. During both the Corpus Christi procession and the Yam Festival, the canopy was “dancing” all the time. In the Corpus Christi procession the canopy, held by a bearer, was twirled around and hoisted up and down to the rhythm of music, indicating where the monstrance was at any given moment. When I asked the church elders about the meaning of this royal object borrowed from the chief’s palace and its ceremonial “dances” and motions above the Eucharist during the Corpus Christi celebration, one of them pointed to the small golden figurine crowning the top of the big red canopy. Taking a closer look, I realized that the figurine depicted a bird turning back, i.e., the state-promoted *adinkra* symbol of Sankofa. The elder skillfully recalled its Akan meaning: “go back and fetch something precious” and he summed up stating with an audible note of pride in his voice: “this is our tradition!”

4.2. “Filled with the Spirit”

Today’s celebrations of Corpus Christi in Ghana, which incorporate numerous traditional elements, especially those connected with royal ceremonies, are well-established manifestations and embodiments of the Africanization of Catholicism through inculturation. Symbols referring to traditional beliefs are embraced in the Catholic context as elements of “our tradition” and manifestations of African identity cherished in numerous post-colonial Ghanaian discourses. Even though these inculturation practices are criticized by some Pentecostal churches, it is evident that a growing wave of pentecostalization as a

more general cultural and spiritual current has had a significant impact on this and other Catholic ceremonies already embedded in Ghanaian cultural contexts.

I also saw that apart from the celebration of the Mass followed by the Eucharistic procession, the Corpus Christi or Christ the King feasts can be accompanied by extensive charismatic prayers organized, for instance, on the previous day in the church or in the parish hall. Even the procession itself was often presented by my interlocutors as not only linking them to their African and local traditions but also enabling them to experience a “real prayer”, described as related to charismatic experiences, which include ecstatic motion, dancing, and singing when their bodies are “filled with the Spirit.” Through this process, they are healed and protected from evil or witchcraft (these threads appeared in the ethnographic interviews I led). Similarly, as in the Pentecostal context, this process can be interpreted in terms of “embodied continuity” which paradoxically bridges Christian and “traditional” religious practices. A Vicar General from one of the Catholic dioceses, with whom I talked after the Corpus Christi and Christ the King celebrations in a small town in central Ghana, emphasized the importance of including charismatic spirituality in Catholic feasts and rituals. For him “charismatic spirituality has a certain natural relationship with African disposition” and with an “African psyche which has to do with vitality, rhythm, dance, harmony and energy”. Interestingly, he pointed out that charismatic spirituality “is in close affinity with our traditional religion”, especially in terms of searching for protection, deliverance, and a physically energetic form of praying. “When you go to the traditional shrine you see they speak languages as charismatics speak in tongues, they dance similarly: exuberantly with the drumming and clapping” (Interview with Fr. John Kofi Takyi, 21 November 2010).

Praying in tongues, charismatic singing and dancing, healing and deliverance rituals, publicly narrated testimonies, and intercessory prayers (often including full bodily experiences combining shouting, crying, dancing, clapping, gesticulating, walking, or rolling on the ground, etc.) have become normalized parts of various annual and daily celebrations in many Ghanaian Catholic parishes. For example, in a parish where I have been conducting my recent ethnographic research (since 2022) almost all parish groups and societies have included charismatic prayer sessions within their weekly meetings. Even small family and neighborhood gatherings—not religious in their nature but connected with some important family or neighborhood issues that need to be discussed—can easily include a short charismatic prayer session in order to call for spiritual support and intervention.

The charismatic way of praying seems to be part of a locally organized religious “style”. Interestingly, a few times during my research I talked to older Catholic leaders—today respected parishioners, often sitting in parish councils and boards—who recalled the “older times” when they had to fight with parish priests to introduce charismatic renewal groups. One of them remembered how the priest—at that time an Austrian missionary—banned the charismatic group from praying in the church. “He did not understand it”—commented Mr. Joseph, who as a local teacher “took the group to the school” where they “were praying in the classroom” doing “spiritual healings, prophecies, and all those things”. When I talked to him, he was a retired school headmaster and a church president in his parish. Recalling the 1980s dispute with the parish priest he commented, with visible satisfaction, that the Charismatic Catholic renewal “is now well present in Ghana”, accepted by Ghanaian bishops and popularized by “renewal priests” (Interview, 7 February 2013).

5. Conclusions

History and the contemporary situation of Ghanaian Catholicism reflect broader phenomena visible within the continental Roman Catholic Church and Christianity. The numerous paradoxes mentioned in this article refer to mingling discourses about postcolonial Ghanaian and African identities, the relations between Christianity and so-called traditional religions, the formation of national heritages, and the Catholic concept of inculturation as well as the most recent development of pentecostalization. Inculturation—while searching for material symbols and embodied practices to root African Catholics in their cultural

identities and local traditions—in certain aspects has gone along with the culturalization of “traditional religion” promoted in the national heritage project. The pentecostalization of Catholicism, instigated within a broader wave of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, refers to a concept of “African spirituality” and might be seen as a specific development of inculturation that hybridizes Catholic and “traditional African” worldviews and practices. Its effervescent religiosity, perforce locally grounded and less controllable within the Church institution, seems to provide many Ghanaians with an “embodied continuation” that allows an immersion in what is seen as an “African style” of worship and spiritual imagination. Significantly, current African Church elites emphasize these developments as a specific emancipation of postcolonial Catholicism. The Ghanaian priest, whose statements open this article, referred to this claiming: “The Africans are not waiting for Europe to tell us what to do. We are now telling ourselves what should be done in Africa!”

While in this article I discussed the specificity of the Ghanaian case, which was strongly influenced by national history and post-independence state cultural policy, it is important to emphasize that both inculturation and pentecostalization represent typical features of contemporary African Catholicism and are lived and negotiated in numerous other Sub-Saharan African countries and societies. The growth of Pentecostal churches and charismatic spirituality in Africa, as well as in other areas of the so-called “global South”, have challenged and influenced locally and globally lived Catholicism. In the African case, the pentecostalization of Catholicism can be seen as the specific development of an inculturation project that has promoted the formation of a new post-colonial African Christian identity based on local pride and an embodied feeling of continuity. It also encourages African Christians to refer to the global religious scene and describe “African spirituality” as a value that is also recognized outside the continent.

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Notes

- ¹ Comparing the previous census conducted in 2010, the recent census has revealed an increase in those identifying as Pentecostal/Charismatic (from 28.3% to 31.6%) and other Christians (from 11.4% to 12.3%) as well as a decline in those identifying as Protestant (from 18.4% to 17.4%) and Catholic (from 13.1% to 10%). The 2021 census estimated followers of Islam at 19.9%, Traditionalists at 3.2%, No Religion at 1.1%, and Other at 4.5%. The labelling of the religious groups was performed by the authors of the census survey and on its own reveals an interesting discourse about various currents of Christianity and conceptualizations of religion. See: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1172414/religious-affiliation-in-ghana/> (accessed on 10 January 2023).
- ² The Church of Pentecost overtook the Roman Catholic Church (comparing the previous census from 2010), with a membership estimated at 10.8% of the Ghanaian population. See <https://thecophq.org/statistics/> (accessed on 5 May 2023). After the release of the census record, the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church expressed concerns about a decline in Catholic membership and the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches.
- ³ The Apostolic Vicariate of Lower Volta was also transformed into the Diocese of Keta.
- ⁴ Visual symbols originally connected with Asante textiles refer to exact proverbs and traditional knowledge.

- 5 However, an insufficient number of African clergy and a quickly growing African population meant that in the 1970s “while the great majority of Catholic bishops were Black the overwhelming majority of priests remained White” (Sundkler and Steed 2000, p. 1021; see also Hastings 1979, pp. 237–40). The situation changed in the 1980s.
- 6 Sankofa is also used in the context of African and black diasporas.
- 7 In some countries the celebration is moved from Thursday to the following Sunday.

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