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Testing Nightscapes
Ghanaian Pentecostal Politics of the Nocturnal

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ABSTRACT Pentecostalism in Africa has developed a special relationship with the night as a time for conducting specific religious activities. Of these, the night vigil is the best-known, with its underlying notions concerning darkness, invisible powers, faith and community. Ghanaian Pentecostals view the night as a kind of landscape where certain spaces and places become important to test the strength of one’s personal faith and convictions because the time after dark produces ambiguities of the good and the bad, or the superior and the inferior, of the spiritual powers that manifest themselves. Participation in Pentecostal night-time activities signals a modernity of Pentecostal beliefs and identities which, by confronting the powers of darkness, bring about a strengthening of the faith that churches and leaders aim to establish in interaction with their following. This contribution ventures to sensitize anthropology to the modernity of these forms of Christianity and the way they are becoming active producers of social and spiritual environments – defined here as Pentecostal nightscaping – as testing grounds for the efficacy of their faith.

Introduction

Ghanaian Pentecostal churches and their leaders are making their members aware of the dangers of the evil spirits that ordinary believers can be exposed to. In addition, the Pentecostals are looking for evidence of demonic activity in relation to the times and places they occur, so as to strengthen convictions and ‘harden the believer in the faith’, as one Pentecostal leader put it. Such evidence is constructed from the events that happen in the lives of individuals and communities, which are often discussed at length in Pentecostal circles in order to understand where demonic dangers lurk. One such event that was widely discussed for the purpose of piecing together a notion of the specific dangers that demons pose and that ordinary believers should be aware of was a murder that took place in the Ghanaian migrant community in The Hague in the early hours one Sunday in June 1998. A Ghanaian immigrant stabbed to death two of his fellow countrymen, aged 16 and 35, in what many perceived a particularly grizzly manner. Entering the house where the young men were sleeping that night, the murderer pulled out a knife and slaughtered the two as though they were animals waiting to be killed for ritual purposes. My interlocutors from these Ghanaian Pentecostal churches described how the murderer, in what appeared to them to be a kind of frantic rage, had chased the two men and had finished them off on the pavement nearby, while reportedly shouting ‘I am king, I am king’. While it was not long before the police arrested the suspect, Pentecostals were horrified that he was still covered with the blood of those he killed at the time of his arrest.
An emic theory began to emerge in the Ghanaian Pentecostal community as to what the cause of this horrific event was. The explanation had its own reasoning and dynamics independent of the police investigation that took place. It was informed by a Pentecostal search for evidences of demonic activity that centred on powers that are active at night, the spaces and places they occupy and that one can become exposed to, voluntarily or involuntarily, if one starts traversing these sites and domains either inadvertently or on purpose. More specifically, what surfaced in these reflections of the event that had taken place was that such nightscapes – a term I borrow from Chaterton and Hollands (2003) who deal with the sites that youth frequent for their nighttime fun and entertainment in America’s urban areas – put the moral and spiritual status of individuals to the test. ‘Clearly’, the Pentecostals said, ‘the murderer had succumbed to some of these forces’ and had not been strong enough spiritually to keep this exposure under control.

Much of the emic theory as to how and why this killing took place and this thinking about the spaces and places of the night have been influenced by ideas concerning the strong faith of the Pentecostal churches active within the Ghanaian community in The Hague. Many Ghanaians have joined these Pentecostal churches that have become pivotal in the positioning of the migrant community in the host society as well as with regard to Ghanaian society and culture(s) (Van Dijk 2001a, 2002a, 2003a). Leaders of these churches have become influential figures and are respected as strong and moral leaders within the community. The Pentecostal ideology they proselytize is known to emphasize the ‘powers of darkness’ (Meyer 1995) and the way it makes its members aware of the peril these forces entail. The many activities these churches develop extend into and are relevant to the experience of the night in the sense that some of the more important meetings they organize continue throughout the night. Both in their ideology and practices, Pentecostal groups appear active in the production of what can be perceived as a landscape of activities, powers and dangers in the night that, taken together, form a religiously informed nightscape. Pentecostalism is thus informative of the meanings attached to various sites that this scape may harbour in the formation of one’s personal faith.

This contribution explores the moral construction of the night in this community and context. Instead of the ‘dark’ (as a matter pertaining to the senses), it is rather a construction of the ‘night’ (as a matter pertaining to the social construction of time) that allows for the recognition of various places and spaces, real or imagined, that may have different moral and spiritual meanings or underpinnings. Being part of an urban situation and frame of reference, the notion of urban nightscapes is important because city life allows for participation in its nightlife that could be condemned from the perspective of pious Christian values. At the same time, the notion of nightscapes allows for the exploration of the spaces and places that are marked in a spiritual domain as the sites where the evil powers that cannot bear the light of day reside. Presler’s insightful book Transfigured Night (1999) explores in a similar vein the significance of the religious practice of the night vigil in African Christian traditions from a perspective of simultaneity as well; a convalescence of a time and space in the night that morally occupies both a location and a spiritual domain. These are sites where the strength of the believer in occupying such places and spaces is put to the
test. Occupying these does not only mean contesting the domains of other unseen, nocturnal powers but also creates a litmus test of one’s own future salvation.

The religious construction of a nightscape

The rumours that began circulating in the Ghanaian community following the violent death of the two young men can be understood by exploring the significance of Pentecostalism as they revolved around the notion of sacrificial blood and the extent to which ‘modern’ people should allow themselves to be involved in revamping traditions. The Saturday evening before the killing had seen the installation of one of the newly established diaspora chieftaincies, in this case the Netherlands diaspora chief of the ‘Brongs’ as they are called, a short form for the members of the Brong Ahafo ethnic group in The Hague. In the Netherlands, as in other European countries, a process has developed of installing members of various ethnically based royal lineages from Ghana as diaspora chiefs. This is partly a postcolonial continuation of an earlier history of the ways in which Akan-related chieftaincies also emerged as a result of the slave trade (Zips 1999). This has given way to a sense of competition between the different ethnic factions in the Ghanaian community. Ethnic groups have been establishing their associations and home-town organizations which in the local vernacular of Twi are known as kuo? The more prominent ethnic groups, such as that of the Asante, have ensured that the installation of their diaspora chiefs took place in a grandiose style with all the chiefly paraphernalia that should be attached to the installation of the ‘stool’ (e.g. golden markers of authority, sandals, umbrellas, and expensive clothes). Smaller ethnic groups, such as the Brong Ahafo, have been eager to demonstrate their grandeur and independence from the more prominent ethnic communities – a process marked and determined by the memory of Ashanti imperialism and violent subjugation of surrounding groups in precolonial Ghana (McCaskie 1995). There is, in other words, power and prestige in being able to establish one’s own chieftaincy as a marker of ethnic pride and symbolic capital, also in the diaspora where the Ashanti presence is otherwise dominant.

In the Pentecostal perception, however, the installation of a stool is often suspect as it requires what Pentecostals believe to be the presence of demonic ancestral spirits of the royal lineage in the ethnic group. For my Pentecostal interlocutors it is precisely on this point that serious problems can emerge. As a prominent member of one of the Pentecostal churches began explaining to me, irrespective of the fact that he had not been part of the preparations or procedures at all, ‘this enstoolment went too far. If one starts calling the ancestral deities’ names and invites them to be present they become thirsty for blood’. These deities can be appeased by the ritual killing of an animal. However, no sacrificial or ritual slaughter of animals could take place at the location where the enstoolment festivities took place (a so-called party centre in the southern part of the city), as slaughter is strictly regulated. So, the Pentecostals reasoned, while the ancestors were called upon through all sorts of rituals, such as the pouring of libation and the calling of their names, their presence could easily become problematic. After all, as far as the Pentecostals knew their ‘thirst’ was not relinquished that

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evening by the ritual slaughter of an animal. This made in their view the entire installation procedure in a serious way ‘incomplete’, if not dangerous.

The common idea that began circulating through the Ghanaian Pentecostal community in The Hague was that the ancestors had been calling for blood as a way of appeasing them, but that the people responsible for calling the ancestors had unleashed something they no longer could contain. ‘You see’, my interlocutor continued, being a member of the Pentecostal church that eventually became involved in co-organizing the funeral for the murdered young men, ‘these spirits must not be tampered with. If they become displeased, they will become dangerous. They will begin looking for the weakest person around that night to satisfy their desires. They can possess such a person and use him for their purposes!’ Pointing to the vengefulness of such demons once they are angered, he continued by saying that ‘they look for the weakest in the community, the one they can easily get under their power, the one who has a feeble character’. The feeblest was this person who would become a murderer overnight. Being known as a ‘troublemaker’ and a person of ‘unstable character’, my interlocutor said, he was a logical candidate for the execution of the ancestors’ vengeance and lust. The Pentecostals believed he had been present at all the proceedings during the installation of the chief which had made him the most likely target. ‘In fact’, my friends said, ‘people with an insecure spiritual character should not have been present at such a loaded occasion in the first place. They can easily become the victims of such demons that treat them in any way they like!’

Much of this explanation of the horrific event that put the drawing of human blood squarely within the nocturnal but incomplete execution of an ‘invented tradition’ was wrapped in Pentecostal rhetoric concerning the strength of faith. This rhetoric was an overlay of two distinct ideological lines of reasoning that came together in a notion of what I propose to call the ‘moral construction of the night’. One ideological line concerns the Pentecostal cultural critique of tradition, the other the Pentecostal moral geography of the urban where there is a landscape of places that are morally good and spaces that are bad, evil and immoral.

The first line of thought has been well documented as far as the popularity of Pentecostalism in and from Africa is concerned. Many authors have explored what Birgit Meyer (1998) has called the Pentecostal emphasis on the need ‘to make a complete break with the past’. This element of the Pentecostal project of modernity has not only been documented in many places in Africa and in the diaspora as an important factor in explaining the ideology’s massive popularity but has also been explored in its manifestation in ritual practice. With the rise of Pentecostalism in Ghana, the practice of ‘deliverance’ became enormously popular (Van Dijk 1997, Meyer 1998, Maxwell 1998, Larbi 2001). In the insecure socio-economic contexts of many African societies, the notion that deliverance may cause a breakthrough in one’s circumstances and fortune became significant to the followers of the hundreds of Pentecostal churches that have been established over the last three decades. The basic notion behind the religious aspiration for a breakthrough is that, through forceful ‘breaking’ (in Twi obubuo), the person can be set free from the past, from the forces that may have been present in his/her life to ‘keep a person down’ and that would block progress and hence prosperity.
For the modern person, the past with its traditions and obligations is not a resource but a liability, and ecstatic deliverance sessions are capable of undoing the influence of certain powers that the past has produced. It is in this respect that traditions and customs in Pentecostal ideology become suspect. Participating in traditional rituals that surround events in life, such as birth, death or marriage, or in this case the installation of a chief, may require a person to engage in acts that call upon or summon the presence of certain dubious ancestral powers. Even if a forbearer of the person (a parent or a grandparent) took part and not the person him/herself, these powers may still be active and haunt the present; something Pentecostals translate as ‘generational curses’.

Such powers are known to be particularly active at night as they may disturb one’s peace, one’s sleep and one’s sexual relations. In that sense, they fall in the same category as other forces of the night, particularly witchcraft. Witches and their familiars (owls, cats and hyenas) also do their evil works at night and if such disturbances take place, people usually have a hard time distinguishing one source of problems from another. Witches do evil things such as the devouring of human meat, the eating of one’s ‘life power’ (iuni) while sleeping, the eating of one’s sexual power by pretending to be one’s spouse and similar acts that drain and block one’s wealth and progress so that during the day life is miserable and full of misfortune.

In addition to the domains of the night where there is the danger of particular activities in the world of unseen powers, there are also the places that form potential peril in terms of what can be seen and experienced in the world of the immanent. The Pentecostal ideology lays out a highly detailed moral geography of the spaces and the places of the urban of where the true believer can be faced with temptations for which he or she needs particular strength to resist. These relate to the does and don’ts of Pentecostal concepts of the social, of social interaction, of entertainment and family life. One domain of moral peril in city life is that of bars, discos, dances, beer halls, red-light districts and similar places of enjoyment, pleasure and relaxation. In terms of its ideology, the true Pentecostal believer should not take part in the ‘ways of the world’ and should resist temptations that are specifically associated with such nighttime activities. The indictments against the use of alcohol are strong, likewise drugs or ‘running around with girls’. In many circumstances, following such regulations implies compromising one’s masculinity where the behavioural styles of manhood require men to indulge in ostentatious drinking and behaviour often meant to demonstrate their economic power. It is perhaps not without reason that the Pentecostal churches have more women members than men.

A complicating factor in the way in which members of the Pentecostal churches deal with such spaces that Dutch cities such as The Hague offer in certain of their inner-city areas is that the Ghanaian immigrant may happen to live right in the heart of them. Ghanaians initially settled in the early 1980s in an area of The Hague known as Schilderswijk, which is close to Holland Spoor railway station and known as an area frequented by prostitutes (Van Dijk 2008, forthcoming). It was only more recently that due to upward mobility Ghanaians who could afford to move to areas less exposed to this particular form of business have resettled in other parts of the city. One of the very first Ghanaian Pentecostal groups in The Hague began gathering in a house in a
street just a stone’s throw from where the sex industry was concentrated. This meant that the Pentecostal churches and their membership were directly confronted with what they increasingly came to perceive as the immoral nature of Dutch society. The many late evening meetings the churches organize compelled them to being in the area, which made them uncomfortable. Whenever possible, the churches would try not to be based in this area and (re-)locate to other neighbourhoods by renting or sharing church buildings with other denominations.

Another moral peril in the context of the city is the social activity that takes place within the Ghanaian community itself. A number of social activities are held in the evenings and at night related to life-cycle rituals such as birth, death, marriage or migration, or public rituals such as celebrations surrounding Ghana’s Independence Day. As indicated above, the Pentecostal churches all share a rhetoric of cultural critique of tradition which is translated into ritual practices that are meant to replace and christianize existing cultural forms of festivity, ritual and ceremony. The most important of these are funeral rites which over the past decades (also under the influence of transnational migration) have become elaborate and expensive (De Witte 2001, 2003). While there is no room here to discuss these extensive funeral celebrations in detail, the point is that the Pentecostal churches in the diaspora have been effective in putting up there own extensive funeral practice (Van Dijk 2002b).

Pentecostal christianized versions of such celebrations are conducted in a more modest style by making sure that no ‘lustful’ dancing, drinking of alcohol or the pouring of libation to the ancestors takes place. Outside the context of the church, these festivities are meant to create a ‘future remembrance’ (de Witte 2003) of the deceased in ways that require a party to be held to encourage a kind of indulging in what is considered ‘lustful’ so as ‘not to forget’. The churches have, however, created a different atmosphere in their funeral parties. The main part of the festivity still takes place in the evening and at night, is still expected to generate generous donations from the audience for the one ‘owning’ the funeral so that s/he will come out of it with a profit, yet there is moral supervision of the way people dance, drink, sing, remember the deceased and speak of God’s grace (instead of calling on the ancestors to be present).

These forms of a christianization and ritual or customary practice have important activities after dark although the Pentecostals do not declare all as evil or immoral straightaway. There is instead a continuous emphasis on why and how activities that can or should be conducted after dark should be brought under some form of moral control and inspection that would demonstrate the s strength of the faith. The moral nightscape that the Pentecostal ideology proclaims is not just one of juxtaposing a secluded private domain against a suspect nocturnal public domain in which lustful behaviour takes place as is elaborated in the following section.

The moral test and contest of the night

In the many situations where I have studied Pentecostalism, in Malawi in the 1980s (Van Dijk 2000), in Ghana in the 1990s and currently in Botswana (Van Dijk 2003b,
2007), I have seen the importance of participating in the night-time activities that appear to be a crucial aspect of being a confirmed Pentecostal believer. Whereas most Pentecostal churches, their fellowship and ministries spend a great deal of effort, money and energy on a range of activities that are conducted during the day, the significance of the night is paramount. In the urban contexts where I witnessed most of Pentecostal day-time activities, there is an enormous energy put into organizing their public presence in the way they hold their Sunday services, their evangelizing rallies and crusades (open-air mass gatherings usually led by a well-known charismatic preacher), their lunch-hour fellowship meetings, their weddings, funerals and birthing rituals, and their healing and deliverance sessions. These activities occur many times in the public domain and Pentecostals attempt to make that presence as visible and audible as they possibly can. Modern equipment is usually at their disposal, which can contribute to not only attracting a larger audience but to provoking complaints too.

At night this Pentecostal noisemaking has led to serious concerns in the neighbourhoods where churches and their fellowships are located. In Accra in particular, things turned violent when, from 1998 onwards, the Ga traditional authority in certain parts of the city demanded compliance with the so-called ‘ban on drumming and noisemaking’ that is usually announced in the month of May (Van Dijk 2001b). This month of silence is respected by the Ga ethnic communities to honour their deities who, after the ritual sowing of the yams, are to be left in peace to provide for fertility in the soil and hence a good harvest later in the year. As such, the month of silence is part of the Ga festival known as Homowo, literally meaning hooting at hunger, which celebrates a bountiful harvest and an abundance of fish from the sea. Disturbing the deities by non-compliance with the ban on drumming and noisemaking in this view may have serious consequences, one of the reasons why some of the noise-making Pentecostal churches came under violent attack. The national government has intervened in the rising conflict between the Pentecostal churches and Ga vigilant youth and has found a solution by invoking environmental laws to ensure that noise from Pentecostal activities remains at an acceptable level, particularly at this time of the year (Van Dijk 2001b). Yet Pentecostal noise-making and specifically its expression at night should be perceived from the perspective of its significance for a wider cultural rhetoric and critique. Why is it that Pentecostal noise is required as a statement in the public domain and why it is that this becomes particularly relevant at night, for its social environment disturbingly so?

In the various places I have studied, night-time Pentecostal activity and the loud, energetic as well as exhausting vigils stand out. In the silence of the night in Malawi’s urban squatter areas, the noise of Pentecostal vigils could always be heard from afar, penetrating into the homes of these neighbourhoods and making a Pentecostal presence in the public part of what otherwise would have been private. As Presler has described in detail (1999), the vigil starts at around 19.00 (darkness falling at 18.00) when people arrive from work. Many will not have eaten because it is important to hurry to the meeting place as early as possible. Praying, preaching, singing, clapping hands and healing follow. It is an exhausting experience as people will have been working during the day and may have been up since the early hours because of their long journeys to work. The idea however is to keep up a forceful level of energy with
its ecstatic nature until day-break next morning. The ecstasy when the Holy Spirit makes its presence felt is manifest in the way people start to shiver and shake, begin to speak in tongues, utter prophecies and revelations and enter into spirit-healing. These are all true signs of the ‘wondrous working power’ at the dead of night.

In most situations people are used to vigils in the shape of wakes at the time of death. These may vary in length and the intensity of mourning, of cleansing rituals and of performative styles of grief, yet in all cases there is an element of resisting and overcoming exhaustion that belongs to the experience of death and loss. One’s presence at the lying-in-state of a deceased member and the prayers, preaching and singing that come with death rituals mark a specific kind of togetherness that many are used to and have a connotation of dealing with the world of spiritual powers, for better or worse. The Pentecostal night vigils fall into this pattern although the meaning and objective of ‘creating fire’ relegates the notion of creating togetherness to a different level. Togetherness is important but the emergence of Godly ‘fire’ in the night is even more so.

Attending night vigils in this sense is hard work. The heavenly forces are mollified to lend the Holy Ghost fire, which is the reason why worshipping throughout the night requires people to be constantly singing and shouting, praying in tongues and preaching. There is no time to relax or sit quietly as it is one’s motivation, one’s power and one’s will that is rendered meaningful in making the presence of this power possible. ‘A weak vigil will not produce anything’ a Malawian Pentecostal told me, explaining his unceasing and energetic dancing. There is a danger in having a weak vigil as its location in the night serves a particular purpose. The night is a time and place of ambiguous power, as it is a moment when the powers of darkness manifest themselves. Witches fly at night, visit the graves of the dead to carry out their hideous activities, their familiars roam the houses to disturb the sleep of those inside and the people in their power will be out on the streets and in the neighbourhood to cause damage and misfortune to their neighbours or their relatives out of jealousy, spite and bitterness. The night thus becomes a time and a space to demonstrate the power of one’s true faith. In Malawi the night vigils were loud to demonstrate the power to contest the presence or dominion of witches and other evil forces, paralyze them and keep them trapped on the doorstep. It was for that reason that night vigils often had a system of so-called prayer warriors or prayer towers that would involve people praying incessantly on the outskirts of the place where the vigil was being held so as to realize a spiritual wall around it.

In Ghana similar notions among Pentecostals were even stronger: the night was the place and time to show courage and bravery in confronting the powers of darkness by being loud and involved in making these powers unable to move closer. It ensures that by occupying space through their worshipping other powers were absent. For the Pentecostals in Ghana the night is not simply one extended, monolithic period of time extending from sunset to sunrise, as one landscape that extends uninterrupted. Certain moments during the night are more important than others, are more loaded with spiritual meaning, have more significance for the testing of one’s true faith or have more efficacy in dealing with healing or cleansing than others.

One element that I noted while staying at certain prayer or deliverance camps was
the significance of moments of absolute silence during the night (Van Dijk 1997). Sleep then becomes significant as a time in which spiritual circumstances, problems or other issues are revealed to the believer, as the following case demonstrates:

Mrs. A. had arrived in her splendid Mercedes just before dark at Grace Mensah’s Adomfa Prayer Camp, a prayer camp located on the road between Cape Coast and Kumasi. As is common, Mrs. A. went to stay in one of the many little huts and houses located in a circle extending from the main prayer ground in the centre of the camp. The prayer ground was now empty as the prophetess Grace Mensah does not conduct ecstatic prayer and deliverance meetings in the evening. I met Mrs. A. in the small house and sat down to talk. Mrs. A., an upper-middle-class business woman from Accra, explained that she regularly visits the prayer camp to take part in prayer sessions, the extensive periods of dry-fasting (no water and no food) for which the camp is known, and to try and meet the great prophetess. Addressing Mrs. A.’s many spiritual and physical needs, which were the result of her business and the pressure that was on her in a competitive market, her highly demanding staff and relatives, who depend on her economic success, required the arrival of dreams. These dreams should however appear, preferably, before the dead of night. While she indicated the dead of night as being around 3 o’clock, silence should arrive earlier so as to allow sufficient time to reveal her dreams to come. These dreams are the night-time experiences that prophetess Grace Mensah is interested in to interpret her problems and issues. The dead of night on the other hand requires prayers as this is the time that afflicting, avenging evil powers perceive the individual to be at its weakest, to be the most vulnerable and to be the least alert. Hence she explained, while dreams must come early in the night to arrive undisturbed, the true believer should be alert, should be prepared and spiritually vigilant when that moment arrives.

We therefore had to stop our conversation quite early; silence and quiet should arrive and sleep should come, allowing a revelation of dreams on time so that the dead of night could be taken on after having had a chance to acquire some strength through rest. (Fieldwork notes, Adomfa, 6-10-1998)

Mrs. A.’s explanation of the various moments of the night that may have different spiritual meanings is corroborated by other experiences in the Pentecostal domain. I noticed that the so-called phone-in programmes that Pentecostal radio stations had started in Accra around 2000 were dealing with the most serious problems around 3 o’clock in the morning as well. At that point, people phone the Pentecostal pastors who are running night-time radio programmes and come up with serious problems relating to witchcraft, sexuality, reproduction, relations that would usually be the most disturbing, unsettling and shocking and therefore the most emotional as well. Staying with a Pentecostal family in one of the suburbs of Accra again proved to me the seriousness of the emotional distress caused by the dead of night as the couple would at times wake their children up to begin incessant prayer. Or the father, being a junior pastor, would leave the house to attend to the spiritual needs of a fellow believer.

The dead of night (ananwofe) is a prime time for disturbances, the time evil forces are at their strongest and that requires extra spiritual care and precaution. This is precisely the reason why the night vigil lives through the dead of night as a moment when everybody should be awake and when ecstasy through the presence of the Holy Spirit is most longed for. As such, the dead of night, when people are tired and exhausted is the time when the ones attending the vigil are expected to be most active, to be on
their feet to jump, shout, pray and preach to the limits of their strength. It is only through the dead of night that a new day will dawn and the first beams of sunlight are therefore welcomed as a clear sign of success, of having achieved what the vigil set out to do, of striking a blow at the evil powers of the night and demonstrating their incapability of controlling the true believer. It is in this sense that the vigil, the night-time prayers and the dreams form a context in which the spiritual power of the believer can be tested and demonstrated. Those who fail the test are likely to succumb to the powers of darkness, a situation the murderer in the story in The Hague so clearly demonstrated. At the dead of night he killed the two young men, when he was apparently unable to resist the forceful powers of the blood-demanding ancestral spirits, a weak and feeble moment he was unable to cope with, unprepared as he was a ‘disturbed’ mind not trained by Pentecostal worshipping at night.

For the Ghanaian community, the case demonstrated once more how dangerous and unpredictable the dead of night can be and how far-reaching the consequences can be of being ill-prepared to withstand the forces of evil. Days after the murder took place, fiends still told me how disturbed the sleep of their children was, how fearful their experience of the night had become and how often they now had to stay awake to cater to their spiritual needs. In one family a twelve-year-old boy experienced sleepless nights for several days and his mother explained to me; ‘you see, we pray every evening, every night that nothing will disturb us, our peace, we are covered by the blood of Jesus! But for children like him it’s difficult, nothing can harm them!’ A Ghanaian international Pentecostal church offered to help with the men’s funeral arrangements on behalf of the relatives in The Hague, in the Netherlands, and elsewhere so that further disturbances could be avoided. The dead of night as a context for the testing of the faith of the individual believer as well as that of the community cannot be tampered with and care should be taken to deal with the appeasement of the powers unleashed on weaker members of the faithful.

Night and wilderness

In his interpretation of the meaning of night vigils and similar meetings in various churches in Zimbabwe, Presler relates the importance of this ritual practice to the notion of the night as a wilderness (Presler 1999:184, 250). Having night vigils is like being out at night in the wilderness in a campsite surrounded by the wild. The vigil is like being out in on a hunt, or being exposed to the experience of being away from the safety and comforts of home, in another place that has existential meaning that only ‘out-of-bounds’ circumstances can offer. This is, in his view, the main reason why the night-time vigil should take place out in the open, somewhere on open ground where the deprivation of comforts and being out in the wilderness can be experienced to the full:

As people deprive themselves of sleep, so in the wilderness journey they are deprived of light, food, comfort and the shelter of familiar village life. The community relocates itself to a setting of adversity and thereby puts itself on trial, testing its power and authenticity in all the dimensions of the pungwe [night vigil]. Will people meet spiritual reality and oppose
evil spirits once again, or will God’s power be absent? Will the community build itself up, or will competing interests and hostilities prevail? Will the group seize liberation from all that enslaves and destroys, or will it succumb to those powers? The wilderness tests the community’s mettle. (Presler 1999:257)

The motif of wilderness as being crucial to true faith has been important in the anthropology of Africanized Christianity in the southern African region in particular. Many of the so-called African Independent Churches (AICs) have been described as ‘wilderness churches’ because of the extent to which a moving through, and religious capturing of, the wilderness is significant to their symbolic and ritual styles. (See for an extensive early study of the wilderness theme, Weltner 1985, 1989). These churches are characterized by extensive night-time activities in which going beyond the confines of culture, settlement and structure is considered of spiritual importance. In addition to night vigils, the climbing of mountains at night while carrying candles is one of the activities for which these churches are known. The way the meeting places the churches are structured often bespeaks an interpretative, symbolic schema in which there is a centre and a periphery, a place of the holy and an outer circle where avenging evil powers are kept at bay. The inner circle is where a highly regulated praxis of activities involving the handling of ritual objects and healing takes place while in an outer circle wild movement, dancing and ecstasy occur. The way the wild thus becomes incorporated into inner ritual practice allows Weltner to perceive of these churches’ inclusion of the wilderness as an innovation of place (Weltner 1985). Their members have often been involved and exposed to extensive and estranging patterns of rural-urban labour migration and were in his view in need of a reconfiguration of the spaces in the expanding cities they came to inhabit. The city as a strange and estranging place required migrants to make sense of their location anew and redefine, also spiritually, how, when and where the powers afflicting their lives could be captured. Including the wild and giving it a place in a ritual space, these wilderness churches not only reflect but also make possible a coming to terms with the ‘village shelter’ they left behind in exchange for a place (the city) where the question of what is wild, what is untamed and avenging is still to be answered.

The new Pentecostal churches that form the subject of this contribution are more based on a later movement within Africanized Christianity that has at its core in a generation of urbanites instead of a generation of rural-to-urban migrants. For most of the urban classes that became part of the new Pentecostal movement in the major cities in West or Southern Africa, the city is no longer a place of estrangement that conjures up the imagery of a wilderness that lies outside the perimeters of the church or the community of believers. Being second-, third- or fourth-generation city dwellers, inhabiting the urban does not require an innovation in the relationship with space and locality that would involve religion as a mediator to the extent described for the first African-initiated churches that came to town and developed in great numbers between the 1940s and the 1960s.

Yet the night has maintained a connotation of wilderness, an exposure to conditions beyond the control of society and ordered culture, and that the true believer should not avoid but actively engage in. The dead of night carries this connotation
most strongly as the moment when things can become very wild, unruly, and violent, even leading to death. In terms of space, the urban can be the prototypical urban jungle where exposure to violence, deceit, temptation and immorality can run wild and where, in terms of the temporal, the city never sleeps. In that sense the precise location, of being a Pentecostal in either Accra or The Hague, has ceased to matter much as in both contexts the meaning of the wild has become similar. While in Presler’s and Werbner’s interpretations a cultural rootedness is essential for the understanding of how and why exposure to, and a capturing of, the wilderness is relevant, in modern Pentecostal understanding such a sense of locality and its specificity in cultural terms becomes less relevant. The evil powers of bloodthirsty and angered ancestral spirits are as active during the night in The Hague as they are in Ghana. And Pentecostal rhetoric about how, when and why people should be aware of the forces of darkness is also much the same in the entire domain of global Pentecostalism in its many transnational manifestations (Van Dijk 2007). They take on a deterritorialized existence, to use the term introduced by Gupta and Ferguson (1997).

This deterritorialized aspect of Pentecostalism being capable of addressing the forces of the night wherever they localize themselves is also reflected by the fact that the interplay between wilderness and the inner ritual core of the church is no longer a visible part of its structure or physical lay-out in the manner it used to be in the wilderness churches. While such a geography that reflects this interplay is absent, the idea of controlling the temporal, of what one does at a particular moment (of the day, of the week, of one’s life) is much stronger than what can be found in earlier African Christian traditions. The ‘when’ has become more important than the ‘where’ in the Pentecostal experience of the night-as-wilderness. Much can be said about modernity’s negotiation of time and the temporal of which modern Pentecostalism bespeaks when it opts for what Birgit Meyer (1998) has aptly called its emphasis on ‘making a complete break with the past’. There is an elaborate pattern in Pentecostalism that formulates such ideas of time and about what temporality means to the modern making of Christian identities. Yet the specificity of the night as a special moment of time has been less the focus of anthropological study of the faith’s modernity.

This relates to the possibility of the fine-tuning of time and of the planning and control that Pentecostalism prescribes to the believer. To be a Pentecostal is to be taught to be a time-planner. There is usually a superabundance of activities to be planned in Pentecostal circles. In addition to the constant planning and scheduling of a range of activities (fellowship meetings, home-cell meetings, deliverance hours, prayer and worship hours, pastoral hours, business breakfast meetings, harvest and rally-times etc.), the believer is told to plan his/her life meticulously. In The Hague and Accra I have been part of many meetings where the major topic of discussion and teaching was ‘how to plan your life’. Detailed instructions were given about how planning could proceed, how goals could be set for the immediate or distant future, how this would involve careful financial and family budgeting, how time-keeping should extend through time, how decisions should be carefully prepared with one’s spouse or other important individuals and how enough room should be reserved for participating in church activities. The careful negotiation of time is relevant to the godly purpose in and of one’s life as it holds the promise that such handling of time
helps to avoid ‘idleness, jealousy, spite and bitterness’, as one of the pastors put it, all of which can easily result in evil powers taking control of one’s life. It is because of this careful negotiation and planning of time in these Pentecostal circles that I disagree with Guyer’s (2007) recent interpretation of what she calls punctuated time, whereby Pentecostals are seen as either formulating ideas concerning the immediate present or ideas about the eschatological, thereby failing to create a notion of time that concerns the immediate future of planning and strategizing.

It is in this sense that the night as a wild place does not produce so much an idea of an exposure to a wilderness in terms of space, of being out somewhere in an unfamiliar or uncomfortable environment. Instead it is a sense of being exposed to a time, a factor of temporality that may be running wild and is beyond control. The night as a testing nightscape conjures up the possibility of something that is not planned in advance, that may potentially disrupt planning for the future and that could involve breaking away from a past. The meaning of the testing at the night vigils, the nighttime deliverance meetings, prayers and intercessions is double-layered as it tests faith, confronting the powers of darkness as well as testing control over time. If deliverance doesn’t work, if evil powers manifest themselves in spite of fervent prayers, if a killing takes place at night instigated by avenging ancestral spirits, a break with the past in the hope of a better future may not have been realized. The urban Pentecostal nightscape is therefore highly complex, consisting of places where one can be and where one can’t be at night, as well as a highly complex temporal landscape of different moments with different potentialities (sleep, revelation, deliverance and confrontation with the powers of darkness) and comprising different positions of the individual in terms of a past and a future and the moments that may disrupt both.

Conclusion: towards an anthropology of nightscaping?

In conclusion, the question here involves the agency of and in nightscaping. The urban nightscapes upon which Pentecostalism at home and abroad appears to act do not exist as an objective reality but are very much ‘in the making’. This anthropology of nightscaping stands in opposition to the more sociologically informed notion of the urban nightscape (see Chatterton and Hollands 2003) that is produced in the context of studies of youth culture, for example. In that literature the question is how youth ‘use’ the nightscape for the expression and ‘living out’ of their youthful identity. Youths become youths by the places they visit, inhabit, make use of or simply spend their time in. Pentecostal nightscapes are in this particular case much more the moral constructs of a night-time architecture that this religious ideology produces in its interaction with an urban environment. The act of indicating the various sites and moments of the urban landscape that we identified as the nightscape, i.e. the act of nightscaping, lies in the hands of pastors, members and the church institutions and organizations of which they are part.

Nightscaping becomes a contested terrain, not only because of the fact that Pentecostalism is highly prescriptive in its dos and don’ts, in its indications of where to go and where not to go, and what to devote time to and what to avoid. This nightscaping
is contested by other forms and avenues of nightscaping that reside in the hands of others. This arena of the night where there are other, sometimes powerful players around that do not, or not automatically buy into the Pentecostal view lends a local specificity to the phenomenon. Whereas Pentecostal nightscaping may follow similar patterns at home or in the diaspora and therefore have a globalizing impact on, in this case, Ghanaian migrant communities living in a place like The Hague, the context that Pentecostalism meets produces what Wrbner has called an argument of images (Wrbner 1985, 1989). This is an argument of images of the night that may be locally available and that could be locally salient. In the nightscaping of The Hague for example, the police and other authorities are guided by locally, culturally and historically specific notions of what the night might bring, where supervision and inspection is required, how public order can be maintained, how the nightlife of the city should be part of their responsibilities and how checks and balances can be put in place to regulate entertainment and red-light districts, the flow of foreigners or a simple thing such as public conduct.

The Ghanaian Pentecostal churches in The Hague may thus come to perceive of their version of nightscaping as being more moral and therefore more relevant to the Ghanaian migrant and to the believer than that of the formal public authorities in the city. Yet none of these forms of nightscaping are hegemonic in the way they control the night as a ‘wild time’. Ancestral spirits suddenly becoming active and craving blood during the night, finding an unprepared vessel in a spiritually weak member of the community and then haunting people in their sleep afterwards came as a surprise in the extent to which this was even affecting a community of believers. While nightscaping in Pentecostal rhetoric means that people are made aware of the forces of darkness and the ways in which they can be prepared for what the night may bring, a continuous ‘returning’ (see Meyer 2006 on this concept) of that effort remains necessary. Pastors usually claim the highest competencies in making people understand the need for this awareness and in perceiving what trials and tribulations the dark may bring. As such, the churches and Pentecostal ideology operate much less as a ‘home away from home’, i.e. as a kind of safe and comfortable homecoming as they have been interpreted by some. (See, for instance, Adogame [1998] or Ter Haar [1998] on this point.)

Being the ones who demonstrate the competence to instruct their people in planning and scheduling so as to make progress through time and usually being religious entrepreneurs themselves who run their churches like business ventures, the nightscaping of painting the nooks and corners of the night before the eyes of their congregation is part of the leaders’ responsibility. While something unforeseen can always happen, they are still regarded as the ones, in principle, who have the competence to know, to know what is out there in the night for others who find it difficult to see or foresee. This is an agency that is not much envied by the rank and file, as exposure to the dangers of the night only a true ‘man of God’ can take.

In terms of agency therefore, nightscaping renders visible levels of vulnerability and competence that are not evenly shared among all in the community but that may indicate inequality and dependence as well. While much of this lies beyond the scope of the present article, the testing and contesting of the nightscapes carries with it ele-
ments of power perhaps in unprecedented ways. It is at least an important element in understanding why the community of around 4000 Ghanaian migrants in The Hague turned to the new Pentecostal churches in such numbers and why Pentecostal ideology and authority have come to hold so much sway over the people. Dependence on Pentecostal nightscaping so as to feel spiritually and physically comfortable, safe and protected at night reigns supreme over the churches in their daytime activities. The power to address the needs in and of the night is something modernity is producing in such processes as the rise of Pentecostalism in the darker corners of everyday life. This is a modernity that promises prosperity and well-being by making progress through the night. While an anthropology of Christianity is rapidly emerging through the works of the Comaroffs (1991), Hefner (1993), van der Veer (1996) and Robbins (2007), this particular element of explaining power and attractiveness in the way nightscaping is produced and consumed is unfortunately lacking in the literature. This contribution has demonstrated that there is room to sensitize this particular brand of anthropology to the potential that religious nightscaping has in explaining modernity’s refraction of Christianity in current cultural encounters in the West and elsewhere.

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Notes

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2 The installation of the Brong diaspora chief was supported by the Brong ethnic association in The Hague, the Brong Kyempem.
3 The Ghanaian community was also confronted with intense police supervision and other forms of civil control. This produced a specific kind of danger for the ‘undocumented’ Ghanaian immigrant who would be required to take extra care when going out at night. This caused another complication for this group of migrants going to their places of work. Whereas there is a preference for daytime jobs, the specific nature of the job market in The Hague (being the seat of government and thus offering nighttime jobs in the office-cleaning industry) provides jobs that would make the laborer in a sense ‘invisible’. Needless to say, these are attractive jobs for the ‘undocumented’ migrant in search of work, the main problem being how to travel from the place where one is living (i.e. in one of these neighborhoods where police supervision can be intense) to the more or less vacated office quarters in a different part of the city. If caught by the police, deportation back to one’s country of origin will almost automatically follow, a process that is perceived as personal failure on the part of the migrant. Travel through the city for them turns into a technique of paying attention to many details, for instance how to dress and make sure as not to draw too much attention to oneself, or avoiding using public transport (trams or buses) to avoid possible controls.
References


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