How do religious collectivities which are predicated on the Word generate images of themselves in the highly competitive religious market-places of many African urban spaces today?\(^1\) Focusing on the burgeon-ing Christian charismatic and pentecostal movements of Ghana and Nigeria,\(^2\) I explore how and why these movements are increasingly favoring electronic media as suitable sites for the transmission of their teachings and erecting of their empires. I will show how this process, no more than two decades old, both concurs with and challenges their religious ideology. I argue further that these developments result in the transformation of the religious landscape in at least two ways: one, they are facilitating transnational and homogenizing cultural flows, and two, they are taking the connections between these movements and the networks they create to new, global levels.\(^3\) Given my concern to identify African agency in these transnational developments, local forces feature more prominently in the discussion of this paper.

Evangelization has always been a primary goal of these movements, not least in the endtime phase of history many of their leaders claim we have now entered. The appropriation and use of modern media technologies facilitates the dissemination of the Word to the masses. The use of the media is clearly a tool of expansion, a reflection of globalizing aspirations, but it is also part of a calculated attempt to transform and Christianize popular culture so that it is safe for consumption by ‘born-again’ Christians. The ‘modern’ media are deemed an acceptable weapon for God’s army in the battle against Satan. While there is clear boundary maintenance on the part of these religious organizations with regard to their own sanctified identity and territory and those who fall beyond the pale of God’s grace, it has not resulted in

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 1998

Journal of Religion in Africa, XXVIII, 3
an introversionist, sectarian stance. In fact, their dualistic theology belies the contested, negotiated nature of religious public space, which is increasingly being defined by the cultural modalities of electronic media (Thompson 1990).

I wish to emphasize at the outset that this essay constitutes only a preliminary investigation of a much under-researched topic. While media studies do exist in/on Africa (e.g. Walsh 1996, Bourgault 1995, Spitulnik 1993, Ziegler 1992), they pay little or no attention to religion, and scholars of religion in Africa for their part seem to have a blind spot for popular culture, let alone things electronic. This is all rather surprising and a regrettable omission given that the new media constitute a critical sphere at the intersection of the public and the private. New types of social interaction and religious praxis and experience are emerging in response to media forms and not just the content of the message, as earlier media theorists demonstrated (Thompson 1990: 225). The media are becoming the new discursive site for the representation of Self and Other, for the mediation of difference. In fact, many of the religious groups tend to define themselves over and against other groups in this evolving public space (cf. Hackett 1993b).

Defining The New Extended Religious ‘Family’

Brief mention should be made of the origins of the charismatic/penecostal movements in Ghana and Nigeria, since their present complexity can be confusing in terms of nomenclature and institutional boundaries. Similarly, a brief elucidation of their characteristics will be helpful in understanding their recourse to the media. In Ghana, the term ‘penticostal’ refers to the older churches (dating from the 1930s and often of Western provenance), while ‘charismatic’ is applied to the newer (post 1970, referred to by some Western scholars as ‘neo-pentecostal’), locally generated movements and ministries whose focus is healing, prosperity, and experience. In Nigeria, however, ‘pentecostal’ is more commonly used as a form of self-designation for these revivalist movements, denoting the centrality of the Holy Spirit in all church affairs. ‘Charismatic’ has tended to describe those renewal movements within the churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church. However, as a label it is gaining wider currency and so it is my preferred term to distinguish this new type of religious collectivity from the earlier spiritual and independent African church. (The latter still exist but are being eclipsed by the newer charismatic churches who criticize them fiercely for compromising ‘true Christianity’ with their incorporation of purportedly nefarious