'MAKE A COMPLETE BREAK WITH THE PAST.'
MEMORY AND POST-COLONIAL MODERNITY IN
GHANAIAN PENTECOSTALIST DISCOURSE

BY

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'My grandmother no more celebrates the Homowo festival,' my friend Adwoa told me when we discussed the currently hotly debated question as to how modern Ghanaians could relate to their culture. The Homowo festival is the most important festival of the Ga, the traditional inhabitants of Accra, in which they commemorate the end of a period of famine by mocking the hunger that tormented them before. Adwoa remembered well that, in her youth, the whole family would gather in her grandmother's house, a modern villa in the prestigious quarter of Labone (Accra), to celebrate Homowo and that the family elders would sprinkle food all around the house and pray to the ancestors as custom would have it. Thus, to conduct a traditional festival in a highly modern context did not pose a problem as such. What makes all the difference now is that recently her grandmother, now in her eighties, became a member of one of the many pentecostalist churches which have become increasingly popular all over Ghana. For her, the Homowo festival has become a 'primitive thing' and she claims that she has moved beyond such traditional customs because she has been born again.

'Make a complete break with the past' is an often-heard cry in pentecostalist circles. This cry is diametrically opposed to current cultural policies of the Ghanaian State which aim at a restoration of national pride in the 'national heritage' and stimulate the revival and celebration of various 'traditional' festivals, such as the Homowo, on a national scale. Schools have been assigned an important role in the conservation of this heritage and are held to teach their pupils the rich and colorful Ghanaian 'culture,' that is, the myths, rituals, songs and dances of Ghana's ethnic groups. The key symbol for the promotion of national culture is the Sankofa-bird, a bird which turns its head and looks back-
ward in the direction from where it came. This symbol, which is paraphrased as ‘Go back and take it,’ is understood as a call to retain valuable ‘traditional’ elements rather than allow Ghanaian culture to be swallowed up by Western values. It is an attempt to rescue local culture against what is represented as the onslaught of Westernization and globalization, a process which started in the colonial days and which has been going on steadily after Independence.

While other groups in society, among them leaders of the Catholic and Protestant mission churches, try to come to terms with local traditions and to reconcile new and old ideas in order to develop a genuinely African synthesis, pentecostalists oppose this revaluation of tradition and culture. They emphasize the ‘global’ character of this variant of Christianity (cf. Poewe 1994) and the necessity to break away from local traditions. The notion of rupture, I argue, forms a key to a better understanding of current Ghanaian pentecostalism. The appeal to ‘time’ as an epistemological category enables pentecostalists to draw a rift between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘now’ and ‘then,’ ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ and, of course, ‘God’ and the ‘Devil.’ In this way pentecostalist discourse takes up the language of modernity as it spoke to Africans through colonialization, missionization and, after Independence, modernization theory. Indeed, a clear analogy exists between the pentecostalist—and, for that matter, the Protestant in general—conceptualization of conversion in terms of a rupture with the past and modernity’s self definition in terms of progress and continuous renewal.

With regard to the Ghanaian context, the analogy between Protestantism’s and modernity’s language should certainly not be understood in terms of a mere accident. As I show elsewhere (Meyer 1998), historically conversion to Protestantism was the flip side of becoming modern in social, economic, and political respects (cf. Van der Veer 1996). Protestant missions certainly propagated the new temporal sense which Habermas—inspired by Hegel—found to be the characteristic feature of modernity: Rather than perceiving life as a continuation of longstanding traditions, modern subjects focus on an elusive present that has be renewed continuously by breaking with the past, and are to draw normativity from the present (Habermas 1986). This, at least, summarizes the modern condition according to modernist discourse. Yet there are reasons to assume that the adoption of this new temporal sense and the ‘break with the past’ which it entails is more problematic than it sounds, both in the West and, as we shall soon see in some detail, in Africa.

For ever since Protestant missions were active in Ghana, they faced