

CHAPTER FIVE

Commercializing the Sacred and Its Implications on Environmental Health, Culture and Food Production in Africa: A Case of Ghana

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Abstract

There exists a profound connection between modern religious organizations in Ghana and the growing trends of commercialization and commodification in religious practices. This study delves into how the commodification of religious rituals, especially within African spirituality, has significantly impacted the environment and cultural practices, including food production among local communities in Ghana. In this qualitative study involving 70 members of local communities, we reveal critical insights that are part of a broader examination of Indigenous healing practices in the region. The results indicate a dramatic shift in the rituals, processes, and ceremonies of followers of African spirituality. The shift toward modern capitalist democracy, combined with the encroaching influence of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam, has eroded the power of traditional leaders, undermining their effectiveness in the community. Moreover, the trend of transforming sacred sites into tourist attractions has diminished the spiritual significance of these spaces, reducing them to mere commodities for pleasure and adventure. As leaders of African spirituality seek to reclaim their relevance in a competitive religious landscape, we see an alarming shift in Indigenous spirituality and practices. They are now employing strategic methods to attract new followers and retain existing ones, raising vital questions about the future of these time-honoured traditions. The implications of these changes are profound and require urgent attention if we are to preserve the rich cultural heritage and environmental sanctity of Ghana's Indigenous beliefs.

Keywords: Spirituality, African Traditional Religion, Commercialization, Commodification, Ghana Indigenous African knowledge

Introduction

Commercialization and commodification are concepts that emerge in developing countries in the aftermath of colonization and the institution of private property regimes (Bailey, 2008; Cole, 2007). Before European colonization, most communities in developing countries, especially in Africa, practiced common property regimes, ensuring that properties such as grazing ground and natural resources (i.e., forests, rivers, and minerals, among others) were managed for the common

good of all without recourse to profit. The community declared certain places and resources sacred and therefore protected from individual ownership. However, there has been a gradual abandoning of common property management practices in favour of private property regimes, leading to the rich and powerful claiming protected natural resources to consolidate their wealth at the expense of the environment. This canker has eaten deep into the fabric of society to the extent that it is now spreading rapidly among religious sects. As this study will show, Africans, who are very religious, have suffered the brunt of capitalism. The market-oriented nature of societies in many African countries is not only a hindrance to development but a catalyst for poverty and a tool for control. In the sphere of religion, commercialization is evident when community members focus on repackaging religious sites as tourist sites to generate profit (Khieng & Dahles, 2015; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). Cole (2007) defined commodification as tourism that packages a culture or heritage into a commercialized product sold to tourists for their amusement.

Additionally, commercialization and commodification in the religious sector are happening in the form of selling religious artifacts, religious tourism, and, to a worrying extent, the main act of worship. Religious tourism is defined as “a form of tourism where people of a particular faith travel to visit places of religious significance in their faith” (El Hanandeh, 2013, p. 1). It is worth noting that religious tourism is not a new phenomenon, but in fact predates two major religions in the world: Christianity and Islam (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Furthermore, religious tourism has long been associated with economic activities, either consciously or unconsciously. Rome was the first shrine of the world that helps us to understand the economic importance of religious tourism (Vukonić, 2006). However, analysis of religious tourist sites indicates that true worshippers are least represented at these sites due to costly nature of these trips (Norenzayan, 2015; Thouki, 2019; Vukonić, 1999), and though religious tourist sites are socially constructed as sacred places, nonbelievers do not necessarily consider these sites to embody an intrinsic holiness (Belhassen et al., 2008; Bremer, 2006).

The commercialization of sacred places compromises the purposes and values for which those places were established (Hung et al., 2017; Qurash, 2017) to satisfy the curiosity of the dominant affluent class. Consequently, some strongly oppose this commercialization, arguing it compromises the “sanctity of religious practice which is central to the maintenance of religious sense or authenticity of a place” (Olsen, 2006, p. 140). Shackley (2002) conducted a comprehensive study of religious sanctity and found that elements of creating sanctity include “closeness to God and the gaining of spiritual merits” (p. 345).

In Ghana, three major religions coexist: Christianity, Islam, and African spirituality. In this chapter, we conceptualize spirituality as a way of life of traditional Africans, including the way they communicate with their creator and their daily practices. We do not ascribe to the fetishism associated with some spirituality, but rather to how our ancestors coexisted with the natural environment for centuries hence, we will refer to African spirituality to ensure inclusivity. Consequently, these three major religions have coexisted for centuries, even though misunderstandings occasionally exist in every normal human organization. Although there are occasional disagreements among various religious sects, these disagreements rarely escalate into violence. However, there are instances where individuals act violently under the guise of religion to retaliate against perceived enemies; such occurrences are not exclusive to Ghana. While the country may lack prominent religious tourist attractions, the core values of each major religion emphasize the importance of nature conservation, leading to the establishment of sacred sites across the land. African spirituality, the oldest religion in Ghana, has profoundly influenced the nation’s cultural practices and daily life. However, the rise of Christianity and Islam has

overshadowed many African spirituality customs and beliefs, resulting in a gradual absorption of its followers into these faiths. Recent studies indicate that African spirituality is the least practiced religion among Ghanaians, although its prevalence can vary by location (Demi, 2019b; Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). For instance, a study by Demi (2019b) found that less than 1% of the sampled population identified as practicing African spirituality, while Islam and Christianity emerged as the dominant religions in Northern and Southern Ghana, respectively.

All these religions place great importance on the conservation and preservation of sacred spaces, where followers can connect deeply with their creator. For instance, mosques are not just places of worship for Muslims; they are sanctuaries of spirituality, just as churches are for Christians. African spirituality is profoundly intertwined with nature, designating rivers, forests, groves, and shrines as sacred sites where prayers are offered to the Supreme God through intermediary spirits. Moreover, the teachings of Christianity and Islam compel their adherents to view the protection of nature as a vital religious duty. Muslims, for example, are forbidden from using open spaces or shaded areas for personal relief, are cautioned against contaminating water, and are urged to refrain from actions that lead to land degradation or deforestation (Armajani, 2024). Similarly, Christians and African spirituality followers recognize the moral imperative to treat the environment with respect and care (Okore, 2024). By embracing these principles, believers can strengthen their faith while safeguarding the planet for future generations.

These teachings carry profound spiritual, economic, and environmental importance that cannot be overlooked. Among the followers of African spirituality, sacred sites like forests and riverbanks are revered as vital resting places for ancestral spirits, who guide and protect the living. The individuals recognized for their supernatural abilities to bridge the spiritual and physical realms are entrusted with the stewardship of these precious locations. These sacred sites do far more than just hold spiritual significance; they act as biological laboratories crucial for the conservation of our natural resources (Greene et al., 2025). Indigenous elders possess unique insights that allow them to observe the behaviours of flowering plants, birds, reptiles, and other creatures, maintaining ecological balance and enhancing their ability to forecast weather patterns. A compelling study in Kenya demonstrated that the rainfall predictions made by Indigenous elders were remarkably more accurate than those from mainstream weather forecasts, due to their intimate knowledge of local conditions (Ouma, 2009; Ouma et al., 2010). Unfortunately, this remarkable skill is often dismissed as superstition, with elders feeling compelled to assert their supposed supernatural powers to protect their invaluable knowledge (Ouma et al., 2010). Moreover, many of these sacred spaces are not just spiritual havens; they are vital sources for medicinal plants and serve as nurseries for Indigenous leafy vegetables and other essential crops, as well as firewood. However, we must recognize that these vital sacred areas are increasingly losing their relevance and significance for which they were originally established. The encroachment by commercial interests threatens to undermine their sanctity. As Western values and ideas continue to replace traditional Indigenous practices of resource management and conservation, we risk not only losing these cherished sites but also the rich wisdom and sustainable practices they embody.

Numerous aspects of life, such as the environment, food production, morality, human relationships, and family structures, are deeply affected by capitalist cash-based economy. The commercialization and commodification of sacred, orchestrated by capitalism, are fundamentally transforming how communities interact and live together. While the commercialization of sacred sites has been studied extensively, there is a notable lack of literature specifically addressing African Traditional sacred sites, especially in Ghana. This study seeks to bridge that gap by

examining the profound effects of commercialization on both the environment and society in Ghana, unravelling the complex challenges that arise in the process. It argues that African spirituality play a vital role in environmental management in Ghana, making it an essential focus for this research. The following section will delve into relevant literature, illuminating the intrinsic connection between religion and African culture and the implications of commercializing the sacred. Such exploration is crucial not just for understanding these dynamics but for fostering a more equitable and respectful approach to the heritage that shapes our communities.

The Intrinsic Nature of Religion in African Societies and the Phenomenon of Commercialization

Africa, the cradle of humanity, is a vibrant tapestry of cultures and beliefs, where diverse religions coexist, including African spirituality, Christianity, and Islam (Horai et al., 1995; Osborne et al., 2008; Thorne & Wolpoff, 1992). African spirituality, the continent's oldest spiritual system, is deeply intertwined with the cultural fabric of its communities. Before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, African spirituality was a way of life that shaped the daily realities of countless tribes. It encompasses essential practices that define community identities, such as hunting, food gathering, coming-of-age rites, and significant life ceremonies, including naming, marriage, and funerals. With the emergence of Christianity and Islam, African communities gained new avenues for spiritual connection, enabling them to forge identities that reach beyond their local environments, breaking barriers of geography, race, gender, and economic status. Unlike the community-specific African spirituality, these new religions offered a broader sense of belonging. However, this transition has not been easy. Conflicts sometimes arise between the doctrines of Christianity and Islam and the rich cultural traditions of African communities. Yet, the profound and persuasive appeal of these religions has undoubtedly led to their substantial growth. Moreover, the rapid urbanization and Westernization of African societies, particularly in Ghana, are contributing to the decline of spirituality in urban settings. Today, followers of African spirituality are often found in remote rural areas, where they strive to preserve their heritage. Unfortunately, a prevailing negative perception of African spirituality exists among the wider population, leading many to practice their beliefs in secrecy. These dynamic raises important questions about the future of African spirituality and the value of preserving such a rich aspect of Africa's cultural legacy.

Despite the significant differences between African spirituality and other prominent faiths, many Ghanaians and Africans at large remain deeply committed to their chosen religions. They often make considerable sacrifices in terms of time, resources, and personal freedoms to honour their religious obligations. Unsurprisingly, the number of churches and mosques far exceeds that of hospitals and schools combined; in fact, many religious venues also serve as educational and medical facilities. This unwavering devotion to faith shapes many aspects of daily life and decision-making. However, a troubling reality persists: such fervent religious dedication has not necessarily fostered the moral values, kindness, humility, or willingness to assist others that religious teachings champion. Instead, we witness a rise in greed, self-interest, animosity, and various forms of social vice—all occurring within an increasingly religious society. As individualism takes root and the pursuit of wealth often overshadows community and social cohesion, the implications are alarming. This concern was reiterated during numerous interviews conducted for research purposes. For instance, Bonsu, a traditional healer, candidly spoke about the numerous challenges faced in his practice:

Menua seseide atrimoden no doso. Obia pe ne de emfaho see obekum nenua. Sika na ekasa wo yenkrom. Enfaho kwan a wofa so nya ye. Se wo wo sika nkwa nipa buwo. [My brother, wickedness has increased nowadays, everyone wants their own. Money talks in our town now. It does not matter how you come about it. As long as you have money you get the respect.] (Bonsu, 015. ER.IN)

This study, therefore, centers on the urgent issue of how the commercialization of sacred practices is contributing to the alarming degradation of our natural environment. We witness the devastating effects of deforestation, the pollution of our rivers from mining activities, and the resulting land degradation. By commercialization, we mean the troubling trend of assigning monetary value to religious beliefs and rituals, particularly in the context of Ghanaian spiritual traditions.

The commercialization of sacred sites has transformed into a worldwide issue, affecting various regions and religions alike. This shift has been driven by the evolving tastes and preferences of both religious and traditional tourists. In China, researchers such as Hung et al. (2017) highlighted the disturbing trend of over-commercialization at the esteemed Shaolin Monastery, a site of immense cultural significance. A saying goes, “all martial arts under heaven arose out of the Shaolin Monastery” (Hung et al., 2017, p. 145), underscoring its revered status and its role as a vital national treasure. With a history spanning 1,500 years, the Shaolin Monastery is not merely a tourist attraction; it is a sanctuary for spiritual connection and the training grounds for kung fu and Buddhism practitioners. Despite its popularity as one of China’s premier tourist destinations, this influx of visitors raises serious concerns. The risk of commercial activities overshadowing the monastery’s fundamental principles of meditation and spirituality is ever-present. Olsen (2003) argued that the surge in tourist numbers, combined with extensive infrastructure development, including hotels, restaurants, and entertainment venues, has led to a troubling degree of over-commercialization, which is detrimental to the natural environment. This trend is not unique to China. A study in Japan during the late 1990s revealed a shift in religious practices, with communal forms of giving, such as monetary donations and volunteer efforts, giving way to more individualistic contributions (Shimazono, 1998). Likewise, in Saudi Arabia, the government has embarked on ambitious infrastructure projects to cater to the growing demand for religious tourism (Qurashi, 2017). In fact, an astonishing \$80 billion has been invested in hospitality, tourism, and telecommunications in the holy city of Mecca, all aimed at ensuring the safety and comfort of the pilgrims who journey there each year to perform Hajj (Picenoni & Choufany, 2012). As we witness the commercialization of these sacred spaces, we must pause to consider the implications. How do we balance the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of natural habitat for other organisms we share the world with?

Although religious authorities have attempted to ensure the comfort and security of pilgrims through funding generated from religious tourism, there are valid concerns regarding the commodification of sacred sites. Henderson (2010) argued that when religious sites are packaged and marketed as tourist destinations, and pilgrims begin to demand luxury commodities, fundamental shifts in human values may occur, potentially undermining the purpose of the religious practices at these sites. Sheppard (2002) contended that selling events or sites in the tourism market compromises their authenticity for visitors. When religious sites are commodified and commercialized, they lose their respected and revered status (Qurashi, 2017, p. 90). In a 2017 study, Qurashi found that many participants expressed concern over the increasing commercialization of Mecca. One participant noted, “Mecca and Hajj are highly commercialized;

the more you pay... the more you enjoy Hajj's so-called facilities, but engaging with these results in a weakening of the spiritual experience and authenticity of the place" (p. 90). This observation does not suggest that the Hajj process itself is compromised. However, the growing demand for comfort from more sophisticated pilgrims compels authorities to implement new facilities. Qurashi (2017) stated that "the ideology of the Hajj is subjectively authentic, divine, and based on Islamic laws" (p. 101). Pilgrimage is not intended to be a punishment; thus, authorities cannot impose the harsh conditions that existed during earlier periods, especially in times when diseases such as SARS and COVID-19 pandemic instill fear in people. Nonetheless, there exists a delicate balance between ensuring the health and safety of pilgrims and pursuing income-generating activities, and this boundary is sometimes blurred.

The commercialization of heritage sites offers several benefits, particularly for local communities, by boosting the local economy. For centuries, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim pilgrims have travelled to sacred sites in Israel, including the tombs of righteous men and women (Ben-Ami, 1981). Recently, this pilgrimage has gained momentum. The increase in the number of pilgrims to Israel has prompted authorities to revive ancient shrines (Ben-Ami, 1981) and develop holy cities in smaller towns located in the southern part of the country (Zaidman, 2003). This surge in pilgrimage has led to significant commercial activities around these centers, such as the establishment of temporary markets, permanent shops, and the sale of religious artifacts (Zaidman, 2003; Zaidman & Lowengart, 2001).

In most parts of Africa, the surge of Pentecostal churches has brought the commercialization of religion to an unprecedented scale. Many eager young pastors pursue theological education, only to establish new "breakaway churches" after graduation. Their motivations often center on the material rewards they expect to reap, rather than any genuine theological differences with their original congregations (Masenya & Masenya, 2018). A striking report by the Commission for the Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities reveals a troubling trend in South Africa: churches are increasingly functioning as commercial enterprises rather than sanctuaries for spiritual growth and support (Mapumulo, 2017). The report highlights alarming practices where church leaders impose "consultation fees" on congregants before providing blessings or prayers. Moreover, many churches are operating fully stocked shops that sell holy water, oil, and religious garments at exorbitant prices—a stark departure from the altruistic nature of faith. As noted in televised church services in Ghana, this selling of sacred items, which could easily be sourced cheaply, preys upon the vulnerable with the promise of miraculous solutions to life's challenges. Researchers have also observed practitioners of African spirituality engaging in similar practices, offering common items at inflated prices while claiming they provide added spiritual benefits.

In Ghana, the commercialization of religion represents a significant and recent shift in the spiritual landscape. For centuries, churches served as reputable institutions where priests were held accountable by their congregations, church leadership, and the wider church community. Yet, the rise of the prosperity gospel in the 1970s and 1980s, spurred by the emergence of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, marked a turning point. This movement gained remarkable momentum in the 1990s (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005; Ojo, 2008; Omenyo & Atiemo, 2006). This era was defined by the devastating 1983 drought, which pushed many African nations, including Ghana, into deep poverty and despair, compounded by the adverse impacts of structural adjustment programs. In this vulnerable climate, countless individuals became easy targets for new religious ideologies (Benyah, 2018; Heuser, 2015; Kalu, 2009). Benyah (2018) highlights the rise of one-person churches as a troubling third strand of Pentecostalism, marked by their emphasis on miracles and

speaking in tongues, often operating with little accountability. This transformation not only alters the nature of faith in Ghana but also raises urgent questions about the implications of such movements on society at large.

The religious landscape in Ghana vividly illustrates the duality of human nature, echoing the themes present in the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. While the religious establishment is intended to nurture the values of human life and dignity through truth and faith, it also harbours individuals driven by a desire to amass wealth for themselves. This contradiction within religious practice underscores a profound conflict between altruism and self-interest. Moreover, this dual aspect of humanity shapes the dynamics within religious groups, influencing relationships between individuals and the collective. As Hust (2015) compellingly observes, one side of our nature often manifests as selfish and antisocial, while the other promotes civility and social engagement. This tension draws individuals either towards personal gain or communal responsibility, highlighting the crucial challenge we must confront within our faith communities.

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive research approach aimed at deeply understanding the socially constructed experiences of our respondents. We gathered primary data from two qualitative studies conducted between 2008 and 2016 (Darko, 2009, 2014), which explored the vital roles of African Indigenous philosophies in environmental stewardship and their far-reaching implications for health, education, and governance in Ghana, as well as the use of plant medicines. A compelling theme that surfaced during data collection was the profound influence of capitalism and consumerism on the core attitudes and behaviours of local communities. Recognizing this critical issue, we pursued a follow-up study to compare the repercussions of Ghana's current laissez-faire economic system with the traditional approach of societal control over property, long held in trust for generations. Furthermore, this investigation critically examined how the transformation towards a commercial, money-driven economy is reshaping various facets of life, especially in the realm of religion.

The study was conducted at the community level (micro-level) but also utilized secondary data from district, regional, and national sources to address the broader aspects of the problem. At the micro level, researchers involved traditional authorities, community members, students, and teachers in discussions about changing practices, protocols, ceremonies, celebrations, and norms that influence their lives. They subsequently asked questions focusing on the cultural and physical environmental changes within their communities over the years. At the macro level, the researchers analyzed data from schools, government documents, curricula, newspapers, visual arts, journals, and other relevant materials related to the study. The goal was to assess current trends in practices.

The initial phase of this study was designed to capture the rich perspectives of key community figures, including traditional healing practitioners, local leaders, farmers, hunters, traditional priests, chiefs, and influential opinion leaders. We also facilitated focus group discussions in carefully selected communities, engaging around 70 respondents who were thoughtfully chosen for their deep understanding and involvement with the research topic. Our goal was to uncover valuable insights about the significant changes that have transpired within these communities and across the broader nation. The questions asked during the interviews included: "What visible changes have you observed in your practices? How has money influenced these changes? What challenges do you face in your practices? How have you adapted to the changes occurring within the community?" Respondents were chosen from two regions in Ghana: the Eastern and Greater Accra regions, selected for their historical significance and the presence

of a large number of followers of African spirituality. Three focus group discussions were conducted across the regions—two in Greater Accra and one in the Eastern Region—to complement the individual interviews. These discussions targeted participants such as students, teachers, drivers, and farmers, all of whom knew local traditions and practices. Similar questions were posed to these groups, aiming to gather opinions on changes within the community relevant to the research topic. Questions included: “How have Ghanaian traditions and religious practices change over time? How has money influenced Ghanaian traditions and religious practices? How do money and wealth influence individual behaviour and perception of others?”

The second phase of our research focused on an in-depth textual analysis of a range of Ghanaian publications, including curricula on cultural studies, indigenous knowledge systems, religions, and education. Additionally, we employed observation as a key research tool, which facilitated insightful comparative analyses. Our firsthand experiences within these communities revealed significant transformations, prompting us to ask critical questions. The data were then analyzed thematically, drawing on predetermined themes that we had identified, allowing us to uncover meaningful insights and connections.

Major Findings

Conceptualization of Environment by the Local People

Throughout our interaction with participants, one key concept that the participants reiterated continuously is the interrelation between humans and the environment. The participants emphasized that while humans are central to life on earth, we are not the sole focus. This is consistent with Darko (2014) who identified fundamental concept that motivate environmental stewardship among many African communities. This implies that although we have some control over nature, it is not solely about humans; other entities also exist that have the right to fulfill their roles. The second concept is the understanding of the environment as a web of relationships, which forms a totality of creation rather than being viewed as a single abstract object, as commonly portrayed in many texts. For Indigenous Africans, and specifically Ghanaians, our relationship with everything around us defines the environment. This relationship must exemplify mutual respect and reciprocity. Consequently, if our connections to trees, rivers, humans, and other entities are not harmonious, it can lead to negative outcomes, which Darko (2014) identified as poor health. Therefore, health is closely linked to one's ability to understand and nurture these relationships.

These relationships are grounded in three fundamental concepts that form the foundation of societal organization, which Darko (2014) refers to as ethics. The first concept is interconnection among entities, where the study found that humans are connected to everything in the world, either directly or indirectly. The second concept is interdependence, which emphasizes that all entities in nature require support or assistance from others to become functional. The final concept is the spiritualization of relationships or viewing everything around us through a spiritual lens. This idea appeared to be the most prominent in current discussions, as respondents noted that the spiritual aspect was stronger, more stable, and more compelling than the physical. Consequently, anything that impacts the spiritualization of one's surroundings also affects interconnections and interdependence.

This established a foundation for understanding the role of spirituality in the effort to sustain the environment, allowing us to evaluate the influence of religion in promoting environmental health. It's crucial to highlight that for many Indigenous communities, spirituality

and religion are deeply intertwined. While numerous Western scholars strive to separate these concepts, this study clearly demonstrates that, particularly in Ghana, most Indigenous communities view them as the same. For these communities, spirituality embodies a commitment to the practices, beliefs, and values that guide their spiritual journeys. Therefore, this study is dedicated to uncovering the challenges we face when we seek to spiritualize our relationship with the environment. By recognizing these connections, we can foster a more holistic approach to environmental stewardship that resonates deeply with diverse cultural perspectives.

Connections to Other Major Religions

While this study focused on African spirituality, it revealed compelling connections with other religious practices in Ghana. Throughout the interviews and focus group discussions, participants, especially practitioners of African spirituality, consistently drew comparisons to other faiths. Traditionalists effectively illustrated their stance by highlighting the rise of new churches as a defence of their own beliefs. For instance, when questioned about the visibility of shrines and sacred spaces dedicated to their practices, a traditional healer passionately stated:

Because of technology, we need to let people know that we are still potent, just like Christians and other religions are serious advertising the power in the religion to their followers. We need to be visible on Facebook and other social media. (Akua, 003.FD.ER)

We thus aimed to delve into the commercial dynamics of Ghana's two most prominent religions: Christianity and Islam. The commercial character of Christianity in Ghana is strikingly apparent. One need only listen to the radio or watch television to witness it in action. During our visit to Accra in late 2017, we identified over 2,000 different churches within the city limits alone. These Christian congregations predominantly thrive in urban centers where economic opportunities are more abundant compared to rural areas. In this competitive landscape, churches vie for followers, employing eye-catching strategies such as performing miracles and addressing the personal struggles of their congregants. The insatiable demand for miracles has become so ingrained that churches that fail to deliver on these extraordinary claims typically struggle to attract large congregations. Moreover, many churches and mission houses have taken on the role of healthcare providers, often treating various ailments and even accepting patients needing surgeries, actions that challenge conventional wisdom. Yet, pastors defend their practices by asserting that miracles transcend logic and claim they are operating within the bounds of righteousness. Some pastors capture forest areas near towns and cities and turn the places into prayer grounds for followers, disrupting the ecosystem of the place. Churches and prayer groups encamped themselves in the forest, such as Atiwa or Achimota forest, for days and months, believing that they would derive spiritual powers after long fasting and prayers. However, the noise and human activities in these forests make the places uninhabitable to mammals, thereby driving them away.

The authors acknowledge the possibility of miracles, as they hold religious beliefs themselves. However, the methods some individuals use to claim these miracles are deeply troubling. Take, for instance, a television program in Ghana where a pastor declared that the Holy Spirit instructed him not to bathe for an entire week, even after using the restroom or engaging in intimate relations with his wife. Subsequently, he submerged himself in a barrel of water and offered that unclean water to his congregants, urging them to drink it for healing. This scenario compels us to confront several alarming questions: How can it possibly be the will of the Holy Spirit for people to consume contaminated water in the name of healing? What miracle could arise

from drinking water tainted with fecal matter and bodily fluids? And how can we reconcile this practice with our belief in a God who is pure and holy?

The Sacred Commercialized

The most pressing challenge highlighted by this study is what we call the “commercialization of the sacred.” For Indigenous peoples, their spirituality is deeply intertwined with African spirituality, and crises affecting this religion have significantly weakened the perceived strength of African spirituality as a whole. This decline is alarming, especially considering the critical role that African spirituality plays in environmental stewardship, which has markedly diminished over the years. This is not to say African spirituality is devoid of any harm to the environment. For instance, some activities, such as animal sacrifices in a cruel way, are inimical to the environment. Animals are not supposed to be slaughtered in an inhumane manner because such a practice may cause the animal to retain contaminated blood for human consumption. During our data collection, we encountered large billboards prominently advertising the locations and supposed powers of African traditional healers and spiritualists across the nation. Once revered and intimidating spaces, the homes of these spiritual healers are now reduced to mere roadside attractions and newspaper advertisements. This shift is not simply a trend. It is an indication of the reduced influence of these leaders and their teachings within society. Studies suggest that fear of entering into places designated as “nanamom paw” or a sacred grove helps maintain the local microclimate, preserve plant diversity and help in cross-pollination (Kujur et al., 2025; Mgumia & Oba, 2003). The loss of influence by the traditional healers could result in people not respecting the laws and regulations governing the management of the environment, and the resultant destruction of biodiversity.

We must recognize that the commercialization of what is sacred endangers the very essence of our spiritual heritage. We must protect and preserve the sanctity of African spirituality before it is lost to commercial interests. Growing up in an Indigenous community, the researchers witnessed a significant cultural shift regarding traditional authorities. In the past, these spiritual leaders received no cash from community members seeking their guidance; instead, people offered tokens of gratitude after their prayers were answered or sickness healed. Such expressions of thanks were often reserved for special occasions or annual events. However, in recent years, this reverence has been overshadowed by a troubling trend. Spiritual leaders now demand hefty fees and additional gifts just to initiate a consultation. The humble, selfless figures who once dedicated themselves to serving their communities, free from the trappings of materialism and ambition—such as fancy cars, extravagant homes, political power, or even Western education—have shifted their focus. They now find themselves competing with community members for these very luxuries. One respondent captured this profound change with remarkable clarity:

As a traditional spiritualist, now, you need to make yourself known by adverts, or you will remain without clients. Although some will never do it, the majority are into it now. They need to make money, travel, buy cars, build houses, and educate their children in schools, so they are doing everything they can. It is not necessarily bad, but the problem is, it is taking the spiritual essence away. (Kwame, 004.GT.IN)

Further investigation has shed light on a compelling aspect of the commercialization of the sacred. In many African traditional contexts, especially in West Africa, two pivotal figures bear spiritual duties: the chief or king, who embodies the physical presence of authority, and traditional spiritual leaders, who serve as the divine communicator. Unfortunately, our study reveals a concerning trend: the role of the spiritual leaders is steadily eroding and, in some communities, has completely vanished. This shift leaves many reliant on their chief to fulfill both spiritual and temporal leadership roles in preserving African Traditions. In tandem with the rise of modern capitalist democratic governance, the responsibilities of chiefs have transformed drastically. Today, they are often expected to possess higher education and to present themselves in ways that appeal to both the government and the international stage. This evolution may help explain why numerous chiefs have traded their profound spiritual duties for a more materialistic approach. It is crucial to recognize the implications of this transformation on the very fabric of spiritual leadership in these communities.

The perception of the spiritual authority of Traditional Indigenous leaders has been diminished in many Ghanaian communities. This may be attributed to the significant influence of foreign religions, especially Christianity and Islam. The use of billboards to promote African spirituality is a relatively recent development, likely inspired by similar advertising strategies used by major religions in Ghana. Many radio and television stations, as well as newspapers, now feature advertisements for both traditional spiritualists and religious institutions such as churches. This trend serves to demystify and desacralize the spiritual realm, presenting African Traditions as a materialistic belief system similar to other religions. Consequently, this makes it challenging to advocate for a distinctive approach to environmental stewardship grounded in Indigenous African perspectives.

The shift towards the commercialization of the sacred has profoundly transformed not only African Traditional practices but also the very essence of significant ceremonies and communal spaces. What were once sacred rituals, providing vital moments for individual and communal reflection, have been turned into mere opportunities for profit. Take funerals, for instance. These solemn gatherings were traditionally a time for the living to honour the deceased and contemplate their own lives. Mourning services and wake-keeping united communities, allowing family and friends to pay their last respects and provide support to grieving families. Today, however, we witness a troubling trend where funerals have morphed into extravagant events that burden families with crippling debts. Instead of being sacred moments of reflection, they have devolved into lavish celebrations filled with feasting, drinking, and dancing, transforming a time of mourning into merrymaking and a competition for status through ostentatious displays of wealth in attire and hairstyles. Furthermore, the processes for securing sacred burial grounds are now tainted by bribery and corruption. An older woman, the mother of a Ghanaian roommate of the first author, shared a heartbreaking story of how her family was coerced into paying a hefty sum to secure a resting place for her mother, who lived into her 100s. They faced an ultimatum: pay a substantial fee within two weeks or lose the burial spot. This real-life scenario raises urgent questions about the morality of charging families for the final resting place of their ancestors. Additionally, other significant life events, such as naming and marriage ceremonies, have lost their spiritual essence. Children are often bestowed names devoid of connections to their cultural roots, while naming ceremonies are more about displaying wealth than nurturing identity. We must reflect on the profound implications of these changes. As we witness the erosion of the sacred in these pivotal life events, it is crucial to advocate for a return to the values of community, respect, and spiritual significance that these traditions were built upon.

The emphasis on tourism represents a critical challenge highlighted in this study. Government entities and public-private partnerships have increasingly taken control of traditional practices and sacred sites, transforming them into mere tourist attractions. Although certain cultural elements like festivals, funerals, and naming ceremonies that once showcased community wealth continue to take place, their original significance has been compromised. Corporations now oversee these events under the guise of sponsorship, often in exchange for advertising and promoting their products. This corporate influence raises serious concerns, as sponsors frequently dictate how these cherished traditions are presented, motivated by a desire to recoup their investments. This study does not claim that tourism is inherently detrimental or that it lacks value for our development. Rather, it argues for clear boundaries to safeguard the sacredness of our traditions. The commercialization of these sacred sites in the name of tourism often leads to the degradation of these vital sites, an issue not faced in nations like the United States, where legal protections are in place to preserve sacred locations. We must strive to protect the integrity of our cultural heritage, ensuring that it remains respected and honoured, rather than commodified for profit.

Conclusion

This study delves into the commercialization of sacred practices within Christianity, Islam, and African Traditions, with emphasis on African spirituality. It reveals a concerning trend where many African traditional practices are being compromised by commercialization. For instance, traditional spiritual leaders now frequently charge fees for healing services that were once offered freely, with only a modest token of gratitude. Moreover, significant rituals like naming, marriage, and funerals are increasingly co-opted by corporate sponsorship, and in many instances, the influence of Western culture has eroded the true essence of these time-honoured traditions with resulted impact on the environment. The rise of Christian churches and Mosques has fostered competition for followers, often relying on sensational appeals such as miracles and aggressive advertising. These shifts pose serious threats to Ghanaian culture, ultimately undermining social cohesion and community ties. It is crucial to recognize and address these developments to preserve the integrity of our cultural heritage and foster unity within our society.

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