

Corpus Christi procession in Ghana as a manifestation of various identities

The ethnographic field research I conducted in the central part of Ghana was concerned with a concept of ‘lived religion’ and was focused on an example of a Catholic community in the town of Jema as well as neighbouring hamlets and villages (South Kintampo District in the Brong Ahafo region).¹ In this article I will analyze an example of the Corpus Christi procession performed in this community to discuss how – during this religious ritual - various identities and group associations are shaped, represented, negotiated, crossed and practiced. My use of the term ‘identity’ will mostly be concerned with its communal and social dimension. I am stating that identities are created, re-created, discovered, revealed, and shaped through social and cultural actions. While identities are established and accepted in social and cultural actions, they need to be further re-established, confirmed, manifested or transformed in public rituals. In that sense identities are dynamic and constantly negotiated communal concepts. Religious public practices are to reveal and confirm, first and foremost, denominational identities. These practices very often, however, reveal a mixture of other identities which might appear in various configurations.

The Corpus Christi Feast is one of those occasions when members of the Jema parish manifest their Christian identity within the public space of their town in a very spectacular way. What is more, Corpus Christi is a celebration connected with the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, and, as such, is unique to the Catholic Church. In the religiously diverse setting of central Ghana, this aspect is important as the Corpus Christi procession goes through the various quarters of the town inhabited by people belonging to various tribes and various religious denominations (Muslims, traditionalists and numerous Christian denominations). Many of my informants noted this celebration as a presentation of their church affiliation and expression of belonging to the specific Christian community.

In Ghana, celebrations of Corpus Christi are adjusted to local climate conditions. In the Catholic calendar, the Corpus Christi feast is celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, which is the first Sunday after Pentecost. As a result, Corpus Christi usually falls on the month of June. In Ghana, however, June is the culmination of a rainy season and a very intensive working period for farmers. Because of this, parish priests in the Ghanaian Church are allowed to decide whether to celebrate Corpus Christi on its usual date, or to combine

it with the celebration of the Feast of Christ the King, which falls on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, before Advent. This seems to be better timing for this region, as the feast then takes place in November (i.e. during a dry season). This is also a time when people in southern and central Ghana can enjoy fresh yam crops and are able to relax a bit after a period of intensive farming.

It is also worth adding that, in popular Ghanaian theology, the concept of Christ as king, which recalls a familiar figure of *ɔhene* (king, chief), is more readily comprehensible than the abstract concept of Christ present in the Eucharist. The Catholic understanding of ‘Eucharist’ seems additionally problematic in the African context – where sharing a communal meal with everybody is a very basic expression of the unity of life. The exclusive distribution of communion among those who fulfil sacramental and Catholic moral standards is often not understood by people who attend Catholic or other Christian churches in Ghana. The percentage of communicants in Ghanaian Catholic churches is usually very low. In the Jema parish, many members of the Catholic community, among them very active ones (like choir members, members of various church societies and even catechists from out-stations) are not communicants. This is most often due to lack of baptism or due to their marital status (lack of sacramental matrimony). Without a doubt, several Catholic moral concepts are foreign to traditional values of many African cultures and do not sound convincing in local cultural settings. This is especially true for Catholic concepts connected with monogamous and indissoluble marriages as well as the Christian concept of sin, free will and personhood.

In November 2010, a few days before the Corpus Christi procession, the church elders of the Jema Catholic parish visited a local chief to deliver an official invitation to the feast (on behalf of the Catholic community). The most important (and accepted by the chief) was an invitation for the opening and blessing of newly built classrooms in the Catholic Primary

¹ During the years 2009-2013, I visited Ghana four times. My field research in Jema was based on three stays (December 2009-February 2010 and November 2010-February 2011, December 2012-February 2013). The 2010-2011 studies were part of a research project financed by the Polish Ministry of Science and Education. Additionally, I would like to express my special thanks to Prof. Jan Świąch, the Dean of the Faculty of History, Jagiellonian University, and Ass. Prof. Marcin Brocki the Director of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Jagiellonian University, without whose encouragement and support the 2012-2013 research trip would not be possible.



Corpus Christi procession in Jema parish. COSRA (Catholic Organization for Social and Religious Advancement) member in her societal attire



Dagaaba men dancing during Corpus Christi procession

School, which was a significant point in a two-day long Corpus Christi and Christ the King feast. During the same visit, the elders asked the chief for a special favour: could he lend them his ceremonial decorative umbrella? They wanted to use the umbrella – which in Ghana is a symbol of royalty and is used during public appearances by chiefs and queen mothers – during the procession as a canopy above the monstrance holding the Eucharist.

On the Sunday of the feast, after a lengthy outdoor morning service outside the Catholic Church, a festive procession began. People clapped and danced as they followed a jazz brass band and traditional Dagaaba drummers. As the procession wound through the town of Jema the dancing became so ecstatic that it caused a huge cloud of dust. The dust stirred up a little bit of envy and a lot of admiration among the spectators from other churches and denominations. Above the cloud of dust and above the heads and clapping hands of dancing people was the chief's ceremonial umbrella shaking rhythmically and protecting the golden monstrance with the Eucharist. The scene was deceptively similar to the scene I witnessed in exactly the same place just two weeks before. During the local yam festival, a similar procession ran through the town of Jema and the exact same ceremonial red umbrella was rhythmically shaken. However, at that time, the chief was in the shadow of the umbrella; wearing his royal jewellery and holding his swords, he was carried on the arms of his people after he publicly ate the new, fresh yams – officially completing one farming cycle and opening the new one.

The monstrance and the Eucharist on the Corpus Christi feast appeared in Jema under an umbrella, which is an easily recognizable attribute of *Shene*. People, surrounding the monstrance and dancing in the ecstatic crowd, expressed feelings of happiness and togetherness. Like the traditional African annual festivals, during which all of the community members gather together, the Corpus Christi celebrations are treated as a very serious communal matter. In African societies being present, participating actively and contributing to the communal good is seen as the highest value and as a social obligation.

Sensus communis is a fundamental feature of a traditional African worldview and it is also one of the most visible

characteristics of contemporary popular African Christianity. Many researchers and theologians point out that the Christian concept of a person as a morally responsible individual is significantly distinct from the traditional African communal and relational definition of a human being. This dispute concerning the concept of a person and understanding of a community reveals a significant shift which has developed in African Christianity within the last few decades. The individualistic approach, which predominated the missionary attempts of historical Western missions in the past, is often highlighted by contemporary African theologians and philosophers as one of the crucial sources of tensions and conflicts between Christianity and traditional African ontology and cosmology. Therefore, in the contemporary approach, which is developing within various branches of African Christianity, the communal aspect of Christian religion is emphasized, appreciated and redefined in the context of African traditions. John Mbiti, one of the most prominent African Christian philosophers and an ordained Anglican priest, even finds a parallel between the Christian idea of the Church as the “Christian family” and “African traditional life in which kinship and the extended family play a central role.” Also the Dutch anthropologist Marleen de Witte points out that “on a local and social level, the church can [...] be seen as a secondary family.”

Various communal identities were visibly manifested during the procession in Jema. Apart from general ties bonding all participants of the procession, smaller groups prominently presented their affiliations. The internal divisions within the Catholic community of Jema parish are divided into two strong forms of identity: tribal and societal. The tribal composition of the parish mirrors the tribal composition of the district and the region (Brong Ahafo). One group consists of local people (Bono) and the other Akan (all of them speak Twi as their primary language). The other group is generally referred to as ‘the Northerners’ – they include various tribes from the northern parts of the country (Frafra, Dagaaba, Grusi, Konkomba, etc.). Tribal identities are publicly manifested during each Sunday service as Twi and Dagaaba choirs appear in a negotiated order during the mass celebration. The Twi choir leads during the main parts of the service and the Dagaaba choir leads during the so-called second-collection.² During the Corpus Christi procession, this division also appeared as the Twi choir – in its distinctive attire – led the procession and was followed by the local people while the Dagaaba choir with drums followed the monstrance. All of the ‘Northerners’ gathered around ‘their music’ – and danced to the rhythms of their dances.

Colourful attires and uniforms of different societies represent identities connected with small communities. Catholic parishes in Ghana are very strongly based on small communities and various groups which are organised and led by lay people. On the one hand, these are prayer groups which organise prayer meetings, healing sessions and Bible studies. On the other hand, the small communities work as strong, supportive social groups literally creating a second family for

² In Ghanaian Catholic churches there are usually organised two collections of monetary donations. The first one is connected with the collection plate during the offertory part of Mass. The second one is organised during the notices and often turns into an extensive dancing and community celebration. Financial gifts from the second collection are usually allotted to the expenses of the parish community managed by the church elders.



A street stand with meat-pie in Techiman, February 2010



The Divine Mercy image held by members of the Catholic community

Africanized (e.g. the usage of the chief's umbrella, the pattern of the procession following the local traditional festivals) and represent the concept of African Christianity as lived religious identity of local Catholics. Secondly, various communal affiliations are revealed and reinforced during the procession. Those communal identities appear on different levels: tribal, linguistic, societal, gender and age-related. As confirmed during further field research, the public manifestation of the group identity during the procession is perceived as the confirmation of involvement in societal issues. Members of various smaller communities, that reveal their identities during the procession,

their members. Those who are in the same society often call each other 'brother' or 'sister' and treat each other as members of an extended family.³ Members of these societies support each other in the event of spiritual problems, including bad dreams and witchcraft accusations. They are also expected to give each other financial support, especially during life-changing or life-crisis situations (i.e. illness, giving birth, a death in the family, marital crises). In the Jema parish, there are more than ten different groups and societies of this kind (e.g. the Legion of Mary, St. Anthony's Guild, Charismatic Renewal Group, Males Society and the Catholic Youth Organization). Members of all of these groups attend the Corpus Christi and Christ the King celebrations wearing societal attire and taking responsibility for various parts of the feast. Sometimes societal affiliations overlap with tribal identities. In the Jema parish this tendency for combining tribal and societal identities is apparent in two very active women's organizations: the Christian Mothers' Association and the Catholic Women's Association. The Christian Mothers' Association consists almost entirely of 'Northerners' while a prevailing number of the Catholic Women's Associations are Akan. The 2010 Corpus Christi procession was a huge moment of pride for members of both Women's Societies as they carried the platform with the monstrance during part of the procession as the representatives of the Parish Women's Council. This was a moment of feminine unity and manifestation of gender identity which prevailed over the societal and tribal identities. All of the interviewed women emphasized the uniqueness of this event, which – in their eyes – showed the importance and active role of women in contemporary African churches opposite – as they stated – to traditional African setting dominated by males.

The Corpus Christi procession in one of the typical Catholic parishes in the central part of Ghana, which can be seen as an example of a religious public ritual, is used by its participants as a means of establishing, confirming, creating and manifesting various – not only religious – identities. First of all, the Christian frames of the procession are very strongly

feel obliged to actively participate in various reciprocal activities within their identity group, which often serve as a support group and secondary family. What is more, religious context and religious identities coexist with other identities and in certain circumstances they can reinforce each other and empower new identities, like strengthening female gender identity which appeared in the discussed case.

Religious festive occasions in today's Africa represent ties which are lived and practiced on local levels and in people's daily routines. As pointed out by J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, a Ghanaian researcher studying contemporary religious life in his country, 'religion and life, both private and public, remain strongly linked in Africa.'

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Members of Women's Council carrying the monstrance during the Corpus Christi procession in the Jema parish, November 2010



³ Actually in Ghana, like in many other African countries, the terms designating 'brothers' or 'sisters' are often related not only to immediate siblings but also to cousins and members of extended family (abusua).