Witchcraft and the Search for Fame in New York City

Religions may have all kinds of spiritual and other-worldly aspirations, but they also very much seek results and effects in the here-and-now, especially in the secular city of New York. In the Big Apple, the pursuit of success and fame has hardly meant the disappearance of religion, including for African immigrants, but has instead meant the vernacularization of religion, as “shrine-priests incorporate into their sacred discourses revelatory knowledge drawn from the American mass-marketing of celebrities, their fashions and lifestyles” (Parish 2013: 1).

As discussed in Chapter Six of *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, witchcraft in Africa and elsewhere tends to involve family relations and negative emotions of competitiveness or jealousy. According to Jane Parish, among the Akan of Ghana, the witch (*obayifo*) “is a member of the extended kinship network, a woman who feels envy and bitterness towards her relatives” who “may cause a variety of misfortunes and illness, ranging from bankruptcy, impotency, cancer and marital problems” (3). In Ghana and in New York City, where many Akans have settled, anti-witchcraft shrines function to reveal and stop the witch, who in the big city hides “in the shadow of celebrity, attending parties and nightclubs, while gorging on food and liquor” (4).

Akan immigrants, particularly the young who absorb America’s “celebrity fetishism and will do almost anything to pursue their dreams and achieve wealth and fame” (7), often turn to their religion to discover the forces that are preventing them from realizing their goals.

At the most popular West African anti-witchcraft shrines, occult discourses recognize this desire and fuel a rampant hunger for material consumption and stardom that revolves around an obsession with image and the lives of the wealthy in the celebrity market. Shrine narratives tell of werewolves disguised as television stars attending the Golden Globes; vampires drinking the blood of rich Manhattan dynastic families such as the Rockefellers, or witches sitting on top of Trump Tower in midtown in order to spy on the downtown village scene in SoHo and Tribeca.
Far from disappearing as a relic of a primitive past, shrine discourses invoke the aesthetic imagery of new articulations of modernity in the most contemporary of arenas, the capitalist market place (7).

Particularly interestingly, Parish finds, “a significant cluster of young shrine-clients in New York City are African gay men from working-class backgrounds. Invariably, they are aged between eighteen and thirty years and frequently work in New York’s entertainment, public relations and fashion industries, often in the lowest echelons as lowly paid assistants, mail room employees, and clerical workers” (8).

Young star-struck Akans typically visit anti-witchcraft shrines because “they have deduced that witchcraft is ‘a hidden, dark force’ that is preventing them from becoming rich and famous…. The shrine is also a place that can feed them ‘the secret celebrity gossip’ necessary in their eyes to give them a competitive edge over their rivals and provide them with the means by which to do this once the witch has been eradicated” (8). One of the vernacularized tools of Akan religion in New York City is the Kente cloth, “the dress of Akan Paramount Chiefs made from strips of silk, and purchased via mail”:

Pictures and symbols of what the priests consider the epitome of the New York media and entertainment scene are sewn or glued onto the cloth. On the one hand, Kente cloth represents authentic and sacred Africa. On the other hand, it is embellished in a hybrid, alluring way. For example, in the narratives of [Michael] Jackson reconstructed for an American “audience,” Kente cloth is decorated with maps of Africa to illustrate links with shrines in Liberia: the Gold Coast becomes part of a stunning international diamond-smuggling operation involving the supermodel, Naomi Campbell, while newspaper reports of Michael Jackson depict another narrative of how his ghost is “advised” by shrine-gods (13).

Parish concludes her discussion with these thoughts, which are as applicable to other indigenous peoples—and to mainstream Americans—as to the Akan.

In their quest for something real to give to their clients, shrine-priests and their gods have reconfigured the sacred practices of anti-witchcraft shrines to incorporate a defining symbol of American mass-produced culture, the celebrity. However, shrines remain boxed in by a rampant media wherein there is no beginning or end to, and no certifiable truth behind, the image of celebrity. As the lives of stars are increasingly reported and become a familiar part and parcel of New Yorkers’ daily lives, witches, themselves part of a client’s kinship network, have become entangled further in intimate social networks made up of individuals that each client “knows”
but has never met. The capacity of a shrine to satisfy a client’s desire for insider knowledge about the entertainment industry and to discover and prevent witchcraft, perpetuated by unnamed female relatives, falters as it blinded by turn of the twentieth century aesthetic of celebrity production and the highly individualized and cut-throat world of publicists, studios and a host of cultural intermediaries who are involved in the creation of a star image. The notion of artificial fame, the pulling-down of the shield of glamour by visiting the real self behind the images rehashed in countless magazines, tabloids and internet sites, has diminished the capacity of the shrine-gods to discover the hidden and concealed, and hence also the witch who hides behind the image of the star.

This is the paradox of a hypermedia age. We know everything; we know nothing; and shrine-gods can move no closer to the rich and famous than their clients. The sacred space of the shrine, so inventive in its sophisticated understandings of the aesthetics of the mass media and entertainment industry in the USA, has met its match in one of the most powerful and alluring commodity fetishes of western power, the celebrity (19).

If fame and celebrity are part of the experience and language of modernity, especially as lived in New York City, how would we expect them not to penetrate the realm of religion, which has always been about achieving effects in the real world?

Reference