

Christian religious radio production in Benin: The case of Radio Maranatha

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scp.sagepub.com**Tilo GRÄTZ**

Free University of Berlin, Germany

Abstract

The author focuses on a Christian broadcaster in Parakou, northern Benin, and analyses its main production structures, its programming, and the actors and their motives involved. It demonstrates how religious media, themselves an assemblage of institutions, actors, significations and infrastructures, participate in constituting the religious domain. Religious culture in Parakou and, more generally, in Benin is not dictated by religious authorities alone: it is made by pastors, lay presenters and their listeners – especially when they participate in interactive radio shows, or join a listeners' club. Both producers and listeners find new avenues to live their faith. Radio producers and their listeners occupy new spaces to live their faith and gain new media experiences to valorise their skills and knowledge, as well as to experience themselves as part of a larger religious community.

Keywords

Benin, radio, radio presenters, religious knowledge, religious media

Résumé

Cet article est centré sur une chaîne de radio chrétienne située à Parakou, au nord du Bénin. L'auteur analyse ses principales structures de production, sa programmation, ses acteurs et leurs motivations. Ainsi l'auteur montre-t-il comment les médias religieux, qui constituent eux-mêmes des assemblages d'institutions, d'acteurs, de significations et d'infrastructures, participent dans la construction des champs religieux. La culture religieuse à Parakou et, plus généralement, au Bénin n'est pas la création des seules autorités religieuses mais également d'une multitude croissante d'acteurs : pasteurs, animateurs laïques et leurs auditeurs – surtout lorsqu'ils participent à des spectacles

Corresponding author:

Tilo Grätz, Zentrum Moderner Orient and Free University of Berlin, Kirchweg 33, Berlin, 14129, Germany
Email: tilo.graetz@fu-berlin.de

radiophoniques interactifs ou deviennent membres d'un club d'auditeurs. Les producteurs et leurs auditeurs occupent de nouveaux espaces où vivre leur foi, faire de nouvelles expériences médiatiques, mettre en valeur leur professionnalisme et leurs connaissances, et s'exprimer en tant que membres d'une communauté religieuse élargie.

Mots- clés

animateurs de radio, Bénin, connaissance religieuse, médias religieux, radio

Africa is currently witnessing the growing importance of its religious media (Larkin and Meyer, 2006; Hackett, 2009a; Institut Panos, 2009). The significance of these religious media, promoted mainly by evangelical and charismatic churches, grew in the context of political democratisation and media liberalisation, a more liberal state policy towards religious communities and the easier availability of new media technologies. Recent studies on religious media in Sub-Saharan Africa address the way in which religious actors shape public spheres and create particular aesthetic styles (e.g. Eickelman, 1999; De Witte, 2005, 2011; Pype, 2009, 2012; Eisenlohr, 2009). Commenting on this growing mediation of religious contents and activities, Meyer (2010) considers religion as a mediated format based on particular conventions, styles and aesthetics. Hence, religious congregations are 'aesthetic formations', shaped by constantly shifting forms of mediated representation and imagination. Conversely, a number of works emphasise the political strategies involved in religious media production by pointing to the motives of the principal actors running religious media outlets (e.g. Hackett, 1998, 2009b; Ihejirika, 2006).

This essay analyses religious media not only as inter-positioned channels of communication or means of transmission, but as central agencies shaping religious fields, as social-technological ensembles of institutions, actors, meanings and infrastructures.¹ It presents a case study on Radio Maranatha, a Christian broadcaster in the middle-sized town of Parakou in northern Benin (see Grätz, 2011). Examining contemporary religious radio production and its contents, it addresses the field of religious radio programming in the Republic of Benin, where the establishment of religious radio stations became possible thanks to a process of media liberalisation in the 1990s (Grätz, 2009, 2011; see De Witte, this volume). There are altogether four licensed Christian broadcasters in the country.² In addition, numerous pastors and smaller religious congregations buy airtime at local radio or TV stations. The current political environment for Christian broadcasting is indeed quite favourable, also because President Yayi, like his predecessor Kérékou, is a fervent member of an evangelical church.

Main production structures

Radio Maranatha was established by a union of several evangelical churches in Benin, the Conseil des Églises Protestantes et Évangéliques du Bénin (CEPEB). It actually consists of two stations. The first is the major broadcaster established in Cotonou in 1998. The station is well staffed and broadcasts in French, Dendi, Yoruba and Fongbé. It offers a wide range of programmes featuring music, church information and news, direct

transmissions from church services, Bible teachings and call-in shows. One of its most popular programmes is *Témoignages*, where believers and converts testify to their religious lives and spiritual experiences.

The second station opened in 2003 as a regional branch in Parakou to establish a closer relationship with listeners in the north of Benin. The broadcaster in Parakou operates a 250 W transmitter on a 42 m pylon, reaching listeners in an area of 100 km, with a budget comprising direct subventions by the CEPEB, paid-for announcements, advertising and various donations. It has only two small studios with very basic equipment, a workshop and three tiny offices, and, as of 2013, employs seven staff members: the director, an accountant, two technicians, a *chef de programme*, a security guard and a secretary, some of whom were transferred from the parent station in Cotonou when the new station was founded. The full-time director of Radio Maranatha Parakou is Louis Togo, a trained linguist who was the station's chief news editor in Cotonou until 2004. He is on air several times a week. Most of these employees, however, depend on another job to make ends meet.

The station also depends heavily on interns and many volunteers, mainly pastors of CEPEB member churches, but also laymen. After a basic technical training, they are allowed to present their own shows either in national languages or in French. Some of them receive a lump sum of CFA 20,000 (€30.50) per month to cover expenses (such as transport, CDs and stationery). The chief accountant, S-, mentioned that local CEPEB member churches are expected to earmark a large part of their fundraising (*caisse d'évangélisation*) to cover radio programme expenses. They are also expected to mention individual contributions during their shows.

Parakou, October 2010. Pastor A– is on air tonight with Radio Maranatha. He is presenting a programme that addresses Christian listeners in Baatonum, one of the major languages in northern Benin. His show consists of a mixture of sermons, bible teaching and shout-outs to members of various evangelical churches in Parakou and its surroundings. Towards the end of the show, people call in to broadcast greetings to fellow church members, neighbours, relatives and friends and never forget the Maranatha radio team. Finally, the pastor announces forthcoming events in the parish and gives mobile phone numbers of pastors that Christians may use in cases of difficulty. (field notes, author's observations and interviews in October 2010)

This sequence of events is typical of a show on Radio Maranatha. For pastors in the region, the station has become an important part of their proselytisation efforts (especially when shows are in one of the national languages). Pastor C– from the Grace Divine church, for instance, claims that he cannot separate his work as a pastor in church from his time on air – once or sometimes twice a week:

I reach more people with the radio broadcasts, including those far away from my parish. Furthermore, many people prefer to listen to radio programmes instead of attending church services. My programme is another kind of evangelisation, and I think a very effective one. (Interview, Parakou, March 2013)

Clement also argues that Parakou is inhabited by many traders, craftsmen and teachers of Yoruba origin. Even if born in Parakou, most of them still maintain their language and are eager to listen to Yoruba whenever possible:

My father is originally from Nigeria, so I have family I frequently visit. On these occasions, I always purchase some of the latest gospel hits in Yoruba, which I subsequently use during my shows – they are especially liked by my listeners. (Interview, Parakou, March 2013)

Despite various technical problems (such as electricity failures, low voltage or the difficulty of storing material in non-air-conditioned studios) the Christian radio station attracts a lot of listeners. They are represented by the station's listeners' club, the Association des Amis de la Radio Maranatha, founded in 2010.³ Its president, Lucien Yémoa, is an entrepreneur in staple foods and tropical products, and a member of the Assemblée de Disciples de Christ church. He is currently mobilising fellow believers to contribute funds for equipment renewal and the improvement of working conditions at the station since most of the infrastructure (including the mixing desk, microphones and computers) is worn out. Yemoa petitions the mother station in Cotonou as well as Christian entrepreneurs, banks, public institutions and NGOs for financial backing. He also deems it necessary to improve the programmes, especially when they deal with societal issues or with individual church experiences and public life in Parakou. The station's main task, according to the president of its listeners' club, is to encourage Christians to listen to and participate in its shows. It also aims to also reach non-converted people in the region (Interview, Parakou, February 2012). Apart from this, many listeners express their wish to hear more local news, including news of parish events, and request such programmes at least at weekends.

Programmes and discursive tendencies

Frequent listeners to Radio Maranatha agree that the morning shows, the Saturday gospel shows and programmes in their mother tongue are among their favourites, especially those that consist of recorded and edited parts of the Sunday services held in the different churches. Close relations with listeners are quite important and are fostered by all staff presenters. Accordingly, many interactive programmes, including request shows, are produced in multiple national languages and present a variety of subjects for debate. In addition to the regional languages (Baatonum, Fulfulde and Dendi), a substantial number of programmes are offered in Yoruba, Fongbé, Gungbé and Mina, as the bulk of (especially evangelical) Christians in Parakou are either immigrants or the children of immigrants from other (southern) parts of the country. Immigrants from Nigeria enjoy listening to Christian programmes in English. The director, who is eager to preserve the station's local profile, insists on the use of these languages, on the allocation of airtime for announcements and on references to township church life. Additionally, the studio regularly organises open days (*journées des portes ouvertes*) and offers special programmes to celebrate a particular anniversary or public holiday.

Also important are the programmes that present each of the local churches, as a further ambition of Radio Maranatha (and of its Parakou branch in particular) is to affirm the bonds between its member churches. Typically, such a show consists of a small production team visiting a church on a Sunday morning, interviewing church members and their pastor and recording parts of the church service. Yet, the Parakou branch also broadcasts pre-produced programmes, mainly from the Christian distance learning

institute *Perspectives Reformées*, or recordings by priests in the United States, Nigeria, France and Burkina Faso. One of the major programme suppliers is Trans World Radio (TWR), which transmits in French.⁴ In total, about 80% of all programming is devoted to evangelisation. The remainder consists of general information, social issues, music and entertainment, and developmental issues. Gospel music shows complete the programme schedule, which changes little so that listeners can develop fixed listening habits and easily recognise the station.

A few examples. The most popular programmes (such as *Verset du jour* or *Prière matinale*) are those broadcast in the morning and offering spiritual guidance for the day, prayers and advice. Radio Maranatha also airs *incantations*: shows that involve preaching and invocations performed in the expressive, charismatic style typical of evangelical church services. In contrast, *Le Christ et la prospérité* is a Sunday evening broadcast presented by pastor A– Y– and secondary school teacher M– Y–. This radiocast is particularly popular among young business professionals and recent job training graduates, and covers advice for success in business ventures such as hotels, restaurants, shops and workshops. Both presenters are eager to discuss the appropriate way to organise these ventures in a Christian manner, that is, to reconcile moral demands with commercial success. For example, one radiocast focused on hotels as a potential source of revenue in Parakou, in which the presenter advised owners to do everything to avoid prostitution, alcohol abuse and other shady activities. By establishing a reputation as a haven of Christian values, Radio Maranatha hopes to attract listeners with similar moral values. Another example is a show that is especially popular among younger listeners titled *Savoir qui tu es*. Broadcasted twice a week from 8:05 to 8:20 p.m., it is presented by various pastors, who take turns to address life questions like health problems, quarrels with friends and failure in school or at the workplace (Interview, Parakou, March 2012).

What does the presence of religious radio programmes mean for everyday religious practices? Many listeners told me that listening to a religious radio station gives them the feeling that they are good Christians, even if they don't always attend church services. Regularly listening to church services or a prayer on the radio is often seen as a personal way to relate directly and instantly to God. This attitude corresponds to what Eisenlohr (2009, this volume) calls 'desires for immediacy'. Other motives for tuning in to religious stations include the need for information about church activities; the wish to participate in global connectivity and demonstrate a religious identity; the desire to organise and routinise daily life (as radio programmes define when to get up, pray, leave the house and relax); and the urge to be moved by compelling *témoignages*. Some listeners, like M–, a night watchman in Parakou, use the shows as a primary source of religious instruction since many Christian listeners lack the time to follow religious classes in their parish (Interview, Parakou, October 2010). For these listeners, religious identity is intertwined with knowledge about the Bible and its moral lessons and advice.

Individual actors and motives

Presenting a religious radio show is considered by locals to be a prestigious assignment; it also gives professional journalists, quasi-amateurs and renowned media pastors a medium for self-actualisation. Moreover, by displaying their talent on air, presenters can

enhance their status. Avid listeners can become radio presenters themselves. Employment at the station can thus represent the fulfilment of a dream, especially for youth. The following two examples underline that the motives of individual radio programme producers are diverse in comparison with the proselytising media strategies used by established religious authorities: the medium of radio allows for a multiplicity of individual motives and imaginative pathways to community involvement.

A first example is that of B– N–, a student at the University of Parakou, who works as a radio presenter at Radio Maranatha. At first, he worked as a volunteer but he gradually took over tasks in the station until the main presenter left and Benoit was integrated as an external collaborator. B– employs a trendy style of presentation in his weekend music, request and game shows, and adds his particular flavour to his Saturday night gospel show *Week-end avec Jésus*, using his laptop to quote Bible excerpts related to the content of gospel tunes. His status has increased greatly among younger listeners of the station (Interviews, October 2010 and March 2011).

C– T–, in contrast, is a woman in her fifties who has developed a somewhat different style. Presenting in Fongbé, she sees her work at the station as an ideal medium to employ her talent for oratory to teach the word of God. Well known in Parakou as a food vendor at schools, C– is also active as a lay preacher and involved in her church's women's committee. She is responsible for women's bible courses, participates in various Christian women's workshops (where she enhances her religious knowledge) and is a member of church councils and development NGOs. C– has acquired her presenting skills 'on the job'. She always arrives at least an hour before going on air (each Wednesday from 10:30 a.m. to 12 and Saturday from 10:15 to 11:15 a.m.) in order to meticulously prepare for her shows: she uses publications such as *La signification du secret de la sacrifice* and a Bible in Fongbé and notes down Bible quotations pertinent to the respective day's gospel tunes, parish gossip, news, advice and shout-outs. Judging by the large number of callers with whom she exchanges colloquial banter and discusses the broadcast Bible quotations, or by the reaction of people in the streets of Parakou, C–'s shows are quite popular, especially among female listeners. Her success as a presenter, her religious knowledge and her decent and pious private life have steadily increased her social status (Interview, Parakou, March 2013).

Religious broadcasting, discursive agendas and individual practices

Most Christian religious programmes in Benin relate to ethical and moral debates, especially with regard to family life, sexuality and gender relations. These issues are discussed extensively in programmes such as *Famille d'aujourd'hui*, *la Voix de l'inspiration*, *Foyer chrétien* and *Clé de joie pour les foyers*. Usually, these shows take up a rather conservative, Christian perspective, often advocating stable monogamous partnerships, a clear division of gender roles and the avoidance of premarital sexual relationships. Pastor Sambieni, for instance, is the president of the largest Pentecostal congregation in the Republic of Benin, *L'Assemblée de Dieu*, and regularly presents a radio show (*Foyer chrétien*, usually aired on Sundays at 7 p.m.) that discusses diverse social and moral

issues, especially matrimonial problems. One evening, he examined marriage cases where one partner has not (yet) converted to Christianity or is a non-practising Christian. According to Sambieni, such marriages are doomed to fail and should be avoided. On another occasion, he addressed the problem of lack of communication among married couples. Stressing the slightly superior position of the husband, Sambieni urged women to take their husbands into their confidence and discuss their issues with them, before they escalate. Only when this does not resolve their conflict should they address a pastor or eminent senior church member. Despite his uncompromising, contentious discussion style, Sambieni's shows are widely followed because of his significant reputation and social prestige as a church leader.

In similar radio broadcasts, presenters read anonymous letters submitted by people in relationship troubles, after which listeners phone in with advice live on air. Through this format, Christian broadcasters join a general tendency typical of many non-religious stations in radio broadcasting in the Republic of Benin. This discursive field revolving around issues of morality is not an invention of the Christian Churches. However, Christian radio producers such as those in Parakou seem to have amplified these debates, adding their particular ethical position and addressing especially their younger and middle-aged audiences.

Comparative aspects

In this way, Radio Maranatha inscribes itself in the large and growing landscape of religious broadcasting that is developing in Benin, featuring a general competition over public influence and discursive authority, especially with regard to family life, sexuality and gender relations. The station, however, is not the most widely present religious media actor: Radio Immaculée Conception (RIC), for instance, is the better established broadcaster of the Roman Catholic Church in Benin. Situated in Allada, some 50 km north of Cotonou, the station is run by Franciscan monks, with many (often recorded) contributions provided by invited priests presenting special Bible courses, prayers and thematic issues. Also integrated in the programme schedule, thanks to huge satellite devices, are programmes produced by Radio Vatican or COFRAC (Communauté franco-phone des radios chrétiennes). RIC is also supported by a listeners' club but, unlike those of Radio Maranatha, RIC's programmes are rebroadcast in various other parts of Benin. Another example is Radio Alléluia FM, a local broadcaster founded by the well established African-origin Church Christianisme Céleste, situated in the country's capital Porto-Novo, in the premises of one of the main offices of the Church. With a structure not unlike that of Radio Maranatha, the station airs programmes on the everyday spiritual activities of the Church, but also runs a wide range of information, developmental and entertainment shows. A final example is the production studio in Parakou of the Union des Églises Évangéliques du Bénin (UEEB), a long-established union of several smaller missionary Churches with numerous local branches across the country operating among 11 language groups. The UEEB does not run its own radio station but contracts broadcasting hours with local community radio stations. Local pastors are recruited to come to the Parakou studio from all over Benin to record these programmes.

The differences between these religious radio stations provide two measures for comparison. The first is the range of technical and organisational equipment and expertise available to them; the second is the programming and style (including the implementation of national languages, the role of presenters and their interactive rapport with listeners). Maranatha works very closely with its listeners, with locally known and highly visible individual pastor-presenters or lay preachers who, in contrast to practices at other religious broadcasters, function as anchors. Stations like Maranatha and to some extent also Allélua thus become local sites of religious life, especially in urban areas. Most of these religious broadcasters integrate international programme exchange systems, and build listener rapport through talk radio or listeners' clubs. Their focus on family life and values in a changing society further contribute to this.

The general media strategies of these congregations correspond to the institutional and geographical structure of the relevant Church, such as their location in urban (member churches of the CEEB) or rural areas. The Catholic Church, for instance, has a very hierarchical and centralised organisation system. Consequently, it has established one major broadcaster in Benin responsible for disseminating its programmes via nationwide networks. As a member of a global religious media conglomerate, the Catholic Church locally broadcasts international programme elements, above all from Radio Vatican, to signify the unity of the Church. In contrast, the numerous smaller church units of the UEEB are highly dispersed over Benin's rural areas. Thus, the UEEB has opted for a strategy that corresponds to its history and position in the country, its (financial) capacities and access to power. In its turn, Radio Maranatha is primarily popular in urban areas and seeks to achieve greater unity among the member churches, a strategy visible in its emphasis on interactive programmes. The historical structure of a Church movement thus resonates with the media it uses, its style and its broadcasting strategies. The major broadcasters concurrently seek both a firm integration in local religious life through call-in formats and listeners' associations, and a connection to the manifold international services of (ICT-enabled) religious programme exchanges.

Finally, all ventures allow individual pastors or lay preachers to create their own public space independent of the established leadership of Churches. This creative licence engenders and demonstrates the ever-growing plurality and 'delocalization of religious authority' (Echchaibi, 2011) in contemporary religious media in Africa (see Schulz, 2011; Sounaye, 2013, this volume).

Concluding remarks

Radio Maranatha illustrates the current trend towards integrating media in pastoral activities. Especially appealing to younger Christian congregations in Benin, this radio station establishes direct links with potential devotees by giving pastors and laymen a voice. Individual styles and modes of presenting religious radio programmes, however, are allowed to differ considerably. Like other religious media ventures, Radio Maranatha hereby profits from transnational linkages to partner churches and their media branches in Africa, Western Europe and the United States. The radio station thus serves both to create stronger translocal links between Christians across the continent (see Mayrargue, 2001; Noret, 2010: 115) and as a forum to mediate local religious knowledge. Furthermore,

it offers its listeners potentially new religious experiences. Religious broadcasting may also be a matter of personal engagement by individual actors such as presenters. Some of them may even acquire a media-generated local celebrity status (see Pype, 2009). Radio Maranatha confirms the tendency for the religious public culture in Parakou and in Benin in general to be not simply created by church authorities but co-produced by a growing multiplicity of actors, including skilled pastors, lay presenters and their listeners as the last participate in interactive radio shows or become members of the radio's listeners' club. Both producers and listeners find new avenues to live their faith, to profit from new media experiences, to valorise their skills and knowledge and to experience themselves as part of a larger religious community – an experience that is sustained through direct links in public and church life and through interactive radio shows.

The ways in which Pentecostal religious radio broadcasting affects public life and communication is an important topic for further research, especially when taking into account the various competitors in the religious arena in Parakou and beyond. From an actor-oriented perspective, however, it is equally important to investigate how religious practices are being shaped by religious media in the process of their daily individual and collective appropriation. This implies a simultaneous focus on various aspects of religious broadcasting, including new modes of semantic creation; morality debates; new aesthetic styles (Meyer 2010; Pype, this volume); dissemination and reinterpretation of religious knowledge; religious debates beyond the established leadership of Churches or brotherhoods; and, finally, the promotion of new modes of religious community life.

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Notes

1. These data were derived from fieldwork in Benin between 2008 and 2013.
2. Charismatic, Pentecostal and other denominations, referred to collectively as 'evangelical', grew in Benin during the 1990s (see Claffey, 2007). Altogether, 42.8% of the population are Christians (Catholic 27.1%, Celestial 5%, Methodist 3.2%, other Protestant 2.2%, other 5.3%), against 24.4% Muslims and traditional religions (CIA, 2010).
3. The parent station in Cotonou has a listeners' club as well, and would benefit from much greater financial assistance by its members.
4. TWR is part of a US-based Christian missionary organisation for worldwide evangelisation. It broadcasts on AM and contracts partnerships with various local radio stations, primarily religious broadcasters. In Benin, TWR established a relay station in Sirarou, north of Parakou, serving as an important element in a global Christian radio network.

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Author biography

Tilo GRÄTZ is a research fellow at the Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, and an adjunct professor at the Institute for Social Anthropology, Free University of Berlin.

Address: Zentrum Moderner Orient, Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin, Germany

Email: tilo.graetz@fu-berlin.de