

THE MIRACULOUS LIFE

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An encounter with charismatic Christianity in Ghana produces in Brian Goldstone a shock of the unrecognizable and unassimilable. Faced with a passionate and embodied understanding of the miraculous not as an exceptional interruption, but as the intensification of ordinary quotidian existence, Goldstone is called to think beyond the exegetical tools of his intellectual tradition.

The break is not between fiction and reality, but in the new mode of story which affects both of them.

Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*

We drive in silence through the din of Tamale's narrow streets, our little bubble of quiet punctured only by the refrain of the afternoon *adhan* ringing out from the city's loudspeakers and, inside the car, by the jagged bursts of indecipherable tongues that intermittently break the surface of Kwesi's soundless prayers. Exhausted, my body aching with what feels like the first signs of an impending bout of malaria, I doze off and on in the passenger seat, drinking in the precious air-conditioned coolness streaming across my face and relishing this brief respite between a frenetic day of prayer meetings and street evangelism and the undoubtedly protracted evening service at which we will be arriving at any minute. It is during moments such as these that I marvel at the apparent boundlessness of Kwesi's energy and intensity. Not once today, it seems to me, has the flow of his almost mantric praying abated for even a single instant:



Forest prayer

Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

whether speaking about some mundane triviality or, as in the street this morning, about the unbreakable hope that will enable him to face death without the slightest trace of fear, I got the impression that the torrent of – what? Words? Intonations? – composing his glossolalic intercourse had merely submerged for the time being, persisting along a kind of inner parallel track of mental activity. A few weeks earlier, when I asked him about this peculiar tendency, he half-jokingly compared it to, as he put it, “those machines that show the motions of the earth” – as apt a characterization as any, I thought, of the manner in which, much like the seismograph's planes and peaks, his transactions in the Spirit seemed to churn relentlessly onward, punctuated by their occasional irruption into the world of voice and sound. As we make our way slowly through the city, I close my eyes and return to those seismic currents. Their oscillatory waves of surges and repetitions yield a fitting image of Kwesi's singular receptivity, of his rigorously habituated – if, as he sees it, necessarily

inadequate – spiritual praxis, of his total participation in a mode of life whose lineaments and whose force I was then still struggling to comprehend.

Such were my tired ruminations as we pulled up to the storefront that doubled as a church. Kwesi turned off the engine but continued to sit there, sensing, I assumed, my own reluctance to go into the already begun service. It turns out he has an entirely different reason for staying put. Some minutes later he finally speaks.

“Let me tell you what happened the other night.”

The throbbing rhythms of praise and worship music reverberate from within the church; a stifling heat has long replaced whatever vestiges of cooler air remained inside our vehicle. I listen wearily, distractedly, but he refuses to proceed until he is assured of my rapt attention. Were it not for my recorder, which, as so often amidst these periods of fatigue, proved to possess a deeper reservoir of stamina than that of its owner, I am sure that the contours of Kwesi's narrative would have blurred into the dozens of similar such stories recounted to me during the course of my research in northern Ghana.

In the middle of the night, Kwesi says, speaking quietly at first but growing increasingly animated, he awoke to the terrified screams of his wife coming from the other bedroom. *She rushed in holding our baby, our daughter. She said I must take her to the hospital. She was choking on something, my wife said, and would die unless we took her to the hospital immediately. Susannah, her eyes were ... she was just lying in my wife's arms, but I knew she was in terrible pain. I told my wife to be quiet, to stop yelling. I said, 'Leave me here with the baby.'*

She said no, she kept crying, and I asked, ‘What are you crying for?’ She said the baby was going to die. I said, ‘Who told you – who told you that! That is a lie from the Devil! Please, you must leave me alone with her.’ She didn’t move, so I shouted, ‘Please, leave this room!’ Finally she walked out, and I held the baby in my hands. I said, ‘Satan, you are a liar.’ I just spoke straight to him, I said, ‘Satan, you are a liar! Come out from her and stop this thing!’ You know and I said it, I said it with some word in my spirit – I had been given a secret word to speak. Would you believe, I never trembled, no anxiety took any hold of me, nothing. My wife was waiting outside, she was still crying, so I walked the baby into the corridor. I set the baby down and I decided ... I said, ‘Devil, I’m not going to pray. I’m going to do something else, and you will give way.’ So I started to sing. I didn’t know the song but I began to sing from my spirit: ‘Glory be to my God – Hallelujah.’ I was just singing it little by little. ‘Glory be to my God – Hallelujah.’ I began to love that song. I loved it with all my heart. All of a sudden, I heard my baby sigh, and she began to breathe. My wife took her and she couldn’t believe her eyes. You know, if I had listened to my wife’s evil report, if I had taken her to the hospital, that would have been the end of the girl. That is why you need to know... you know, I was telling you about the miraculous, about the miraculous life. That is why I am telling you all this. If you were walking in the Spirit, Brian, you would never feel this way. If you were sleeping and eating and thinking in the Spirit, you would never shake. Because the reality that my wife saw and the reality that I saw, they were not the same – no, they were not the same at all. But you must train – like



Prayer for healing
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

any good thing, you must work for it. Once you’re living it, though ...

These last words of his trail off as he places his hand on my left shoulder. I am sweating from the heat and from what I now feel with certainty to be the onset of a fever. I take a sip of warm water, wishing I was anywhere but in this car, this space, about to be prayed over by a man who seems convinced that my enervated state is due to a deficiency of faith and, likely, a coordinated attack of the Enemy as well. “What God is trying to give you,” Kwesi says after finishing his prayer, “is his Word in your spirit. And when that Word is in your spirit, when you see with new eyes, when you hear with new ears, you can create a world. You realize what I’m saying?” he asks. “You understand this power? You can create a world with a Word. So seek it.”

*

A story such as this is not unfamiliar to anthropologists, and we have amassed a formidable conceptual library to which to turn for unpacking its constituent parts: its sociology and political economy, its desires and sensibilities, its pasts, its presents, its potential futures. And for all the drama of the narrative – the choking daughter, the screaming wife, the uncomfortable ethnographer – it contains within it not a single term, not a single motif, that has gone unstudied or untheorized in the books that comprise that library. So it is that when Kwesi says at the end of his story that all of this has to do with *the miraculous*, with *the miraculous life*, we may find ourselves fascinated or intrigued, but we won’t be at a loss as to what these words entail or the energies that propel them: if nothing else, the assumption goes, surely we would recognize a miracle if we saw one.

[surely we would recognize a miracle if we saw one](#)

Yet it is precisely this presumption that Kwesi’s story seemed to challenge, and over time I have come increasingly to suspect that the conceptual devices that have been handed down to me, to us, for the apprehension of such putatively religious forms are inadequate, not so much wrong as irrelevant, to the task of finding an expressive mode in which the realities so singularly and, at times, disturbingly heralded by people like Kwesi might somehow remain intact – in which, to put it in slightly different terms, they might be permitted to stake their claim. For it is, to be sure, a *claim* that Kwesi’s reality wishes to stake. According to him, the world he sees and inhabits and the world his wife sees and inhabits are not the same worlds; nor, for that matter, and against any hope for a kind of agreement to disagree,

are they to be equally valued. Although his wife, like Kwesi, was and remains a born-again believer and an energetic member of their tiny church, her spiritual sensorium, as exhibited by something so seemingly innocuous, so seemingly commonsensical as wanting to send their choking daughter to the hospital, was evidently a great deal less developed than his own. Where his wife saw a child in pain, unable to breathe owing to the unknown object lodged in her throat, Kwesi discerned a word to be spoken, a song to be sung, an Enemy to be defeated. Suffice it to say, this was hardly a case of differing opinions: hers was not simply a mistaken prognosis; it was an unambiguously *evil* one. If such a chasm separated, however momentarily, his wife's manner of seeing (and sleeping and eating and thinking) in the Spirit from his own, how much greater was the disjuncture between our respective habits of perception? In retrospect it became clear that Kwesi's testimony in the car that afternoon was deployed as an object lesson whose illocutionary force, whose *intentio*, as Walter Benjamin might put it, consisted in its desire to falsify, to give the lie to, the coordinates of truth and falsity that organized my reality – a reality held hostage to, among other things, a defective image of thought as regards the Holy Spirit's action in the world and human participation in it; which is to say, the very idea of “miracle” as such.

[Kwesi's testimony in the car that afternoon was deployed ... to give the lie to the coordinates of truth and falsity that organized my reality](#)

This notion of a defective or dogmatic image of thought comes from Gilles Deleuze, who, first in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1983) and then in



Spiritual warfare (“on the count of three, I want you to clap, and your enemies will be destroyed!”)

Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

Difference and Repetition (1994), utilizes the term to designate those impediments, those hidden orthodoxies or conjectures – what he calls implicit or subjective presuppositions – that for centuries have kept philosophy from achieving its various rebeginnings. What is needed, says Deleuze, is an encounter, “be it with Socrates, a temple, a demon” or some other “strangeness or enmity,” that would “awaken thought from its natural stupor,” that would, in other words, through a shock of the unrecognizable and unassimilable, liberate thought from “those images which imprison it.” Odd as it may seem, I am struck by the pertinence of Deleuze's philosophical diagnostics to our encounter with Kwesi's testimony, for while the specific images that Deleuze seeks to excavate and abandon – in this case those of identity and recognition – would appear to have little or nothing to do with our apprehension of the miraculous, our images of the latter, I came to realize, have been no less stubborn or intractable. As Ruth Marshall has forcefully demonstrated in her work

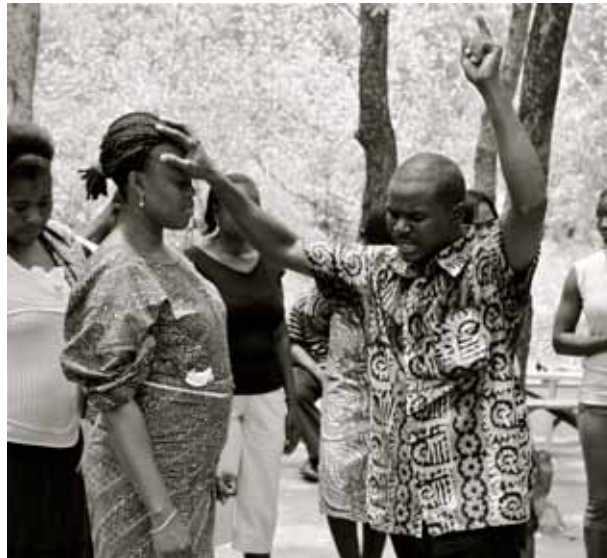
on Nigerian Pentecostalism, what we have recurrently been given is a conception of the miraculous refracted through an image of the Event, the exception, the transgression of, if not “natural law” per se, then at least what has come to be authorized as the shape of ordinary existence. “What is a miracle?” asks Caesarius of Heisterbach in the early thirteenth century. “We call a miracle whatever is done contrary to the usual course of nature [*contra solitum cursum naturae*], hence we wonder.” Emerging from the technical theological and philosophical vocabularies of medieval scholasticism, and put to use in the nascent canonization procedures that accompanied them, versions of this picture of the miraculous can be evinced in everything from early modern debates surrounding “general” versus “particular” will – for example, Nicolas Malebranche's assertion that “the laws of nature are always quite simple and quite general... God does not act at all by particular wills, unless order requires a miracle” – and the development of Humean epistemology to, more recently and recognizably, Alain Badiou's theorization of the unanticipated, irruptive “truth event” and Carl Schmitt's theological-political nexus of miracle and exception. Rupture and suspension, negation and nature, and law and intervention – these are the keywords that constitute our prevailing image, that undergird the entire edifice upon which, at least in the knowledge formations we inhabit, miracle has been and continues to be constructed.

[our apprehension\[s\] of the miraculous ... have been no less stubborn or intractable](#)

Just as Deleuze perceived the fact of every thought-image disclosing its own ontology, its own story

and style of life, so too does this particular image of thought, this particular image of the miraculous, open onto and presuppose a peculiar story of its own. I can think of no better name for this story than that of *sovereignty*. For when Schmitt famously claimed in the penultimate chapter of his *Political Theology* that “the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology,” where, as he put it, “sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” he was writing as merely one in a long tradition of construing miracle not only as a theological or philosophical but as a theologico-political thematic, a tradition in which, even when a specific arrangement of sovereignty (e.g., dictatorship or republicanism) was being opposed, it was nevertheless presumed that *any discourse on the miraculous was simultaneously and necessarily a discourse on sovereign power*. (This holds true even for that constellation of German-Jewish thinkers in the interwar period who, in reconceptualizing the miraculous on the terrain of prophecy and fulfillment instead of nature and suspension, attempted, as political theorist Bonnie Honig puts it, to “take exception to the exception.”)

A fuller elucidation of the extent to which this story has managed in recent years to capture our scholarly imaginations (encompassing domains as analytically diverse as economics, humanitarianism, theology, and political theory), and the potential resources for freeing ourselves from it, will need to be undertaken elsewhere. Here I will limit myself to the assertion that in continuing to reproduce the story of sovereignty – a story whose animating doctrines and motifs cut to the very heart of the Western intellectual tradition, and so also a story that, from Foucault’s regicidal effort at pitching the king’s decapitated head into the field of biopolitics to, more



Prayer for healing
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

recently and ambiguously, Hardt and Negri’s call to go beyond our “apocalyptic” obsession with sovereign authority in favor of “the really dominant forms of power” that confront us today (the “predominant contemporary form of sovereignty,” they write, “if we still want to call it that”), many have tried to put an end to; a story that despite or perhaps because of repeated warnings that they should resist the temptation to tell it (recall Radcliffe-Brown’s forward to *African Political Systems* in which the findings of its contributors are contrasted with what he calls the “fictions” of political philosophy, with the latter’s insistence on the state, and the notion of sovereignty, as the locus of political power), Africanists have begun to narrate with surprising vigor, finding some new permutation, some shifting logic of sovereign power in everything from churches and NGOs to

informal economies and HIV clinics – in continuing to tell this story, I want to suggest, we are not brought any closer to the reality Kwesi admonished me to seek.

[in continuing to reproduce the story of sovereignty ... we are not brought any closer to the reality Kwesi admonished me to seek](#)

And so we confront a question that, though seldom asked, seems as crucial as it is inevitable: the question, that is, as to whether abandoning the time-worn link between miracles and sovereign power, the great Schmittian dialectic of suspension and interruption, is to abandon the possibility of a political theology more generally. I want to argue that it doesn’t, and that, whether conceived vertically or horizontally, top-down or democratically, the rubric of sovereign power by no means exhausts the forms of ethico-political life – the forms of mutuality, desire, aspiration, and indeed destruction – that might be organized by an alternative grammar of the miraculous. Yet how to think this other grammar, this other story, this other world that is emplacing itself across the continent today, how to think it beyond the rubrics that have been handed down to us is not an easy task. It pushes us into regions rarely visited by our queries: ones oriented, I discovered, less around “nature” than around *creation*, ones defined less in terms of “exception” than in terms of *inception*, and ones whose truth status derives not from disinterested proof or impartial evidence but from an intensive, wholly passionate (though no less “objective”) mode of *storytelling*. And it is the reality that follows from such stories, the world spoken by a word, as Kwesi would say, that comes to compose

the fabric of ordinary life, a life – a miraculous life – in which miracles are received not as interruptions but as *intensifications* of the everyday. Where in another theological universe the miraculous would inevitably point the way to a metaphysics of transcendence, such that any creative act would merely mimic or analogize God’s ordinary act of speaking something out of nothing, here “miracle” appears to name a quite different relationality, less of vertical emanation than of immanent *participation*.

Circumventing the story of a world of sovereignty, we are confronted with another story, one that aspires to nothing less than the rewriting of all other stories, the stories we call “historical” and “political,” “medical” and “economic.” It rewrites the story of Africa and Ghana and northern Ghana. It rewrites the story of development and success, death and misfortune, the story of soccer victories and defeats, the story of Islam and the War on Terror. It rewrites the story of why I was feeling sick that day, of why my energy was depleted. And, above all, it rewrites the story we call miracle, no longer a capital “E” event, a once-for-all-time episode, but rather a profusion of events, jets of singularity, as Deleuze might put it, an entire lifestyle of recombinant, paratactic (“*and... and...*”) potentialities, of seemingly commonplace encounters full to bursting with meaning.

In spite of the huge archive on this religiosity that has emerged in recent years, we still know very little about the kinds of politics, the kinds of futures it insinuates. Yet there is little doubt that beginning such a task will entail our accompanying, or rather following, a word like “miracle” back into the weave of affinities and associations in which it lives and breathes; or, at the very least, allowing our bodies to linger within spaces – Kwesi’s car for example

– where we might be haunted, *affected*, by the realization of our unwillingness or incapacity to do so.



Left
Casting out a demon
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

Facing page
Post-deliverance
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone





Left
Reading the word
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

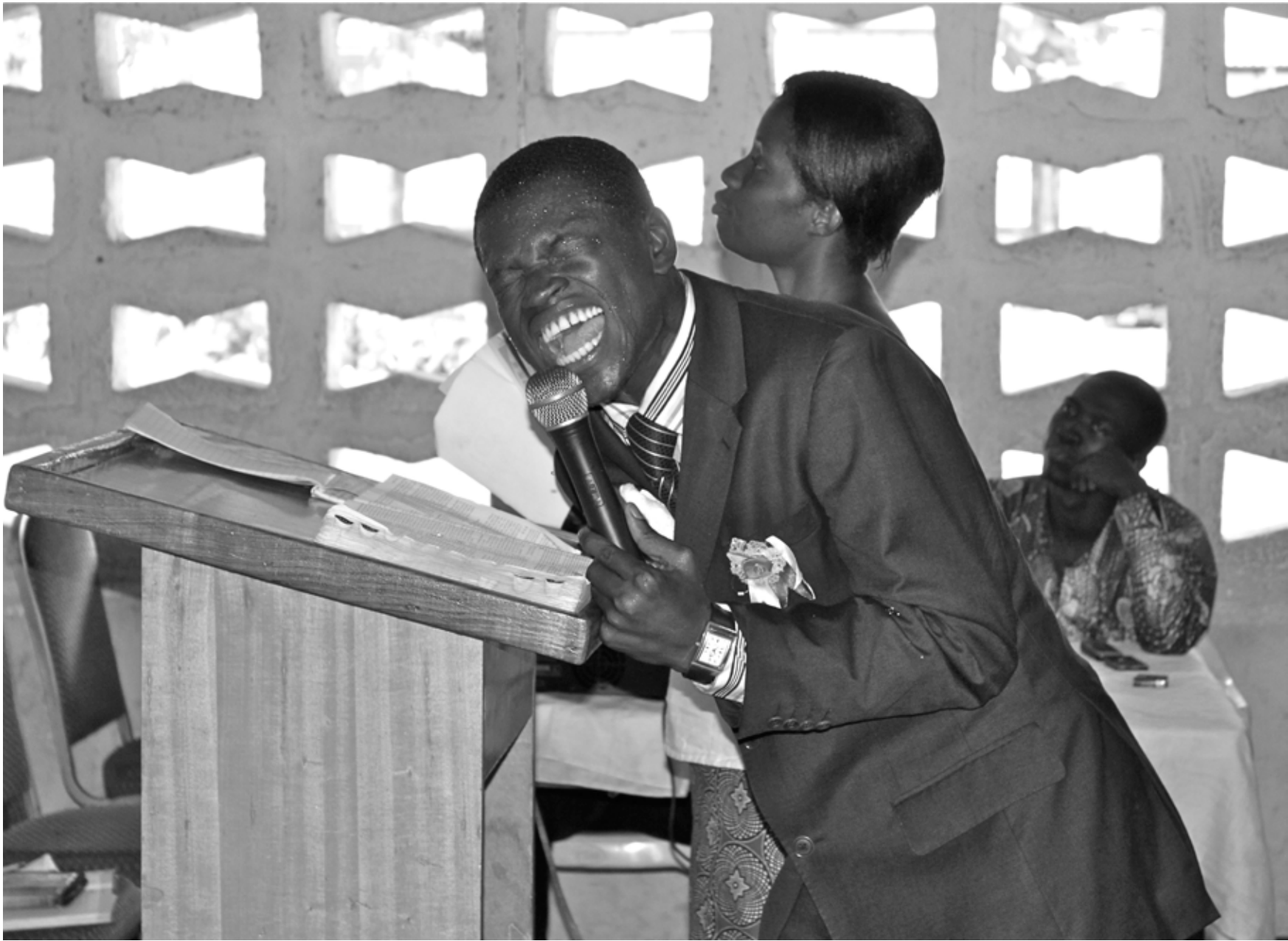
Facing page
Praise and worship
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone





Left
Sunday morning
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

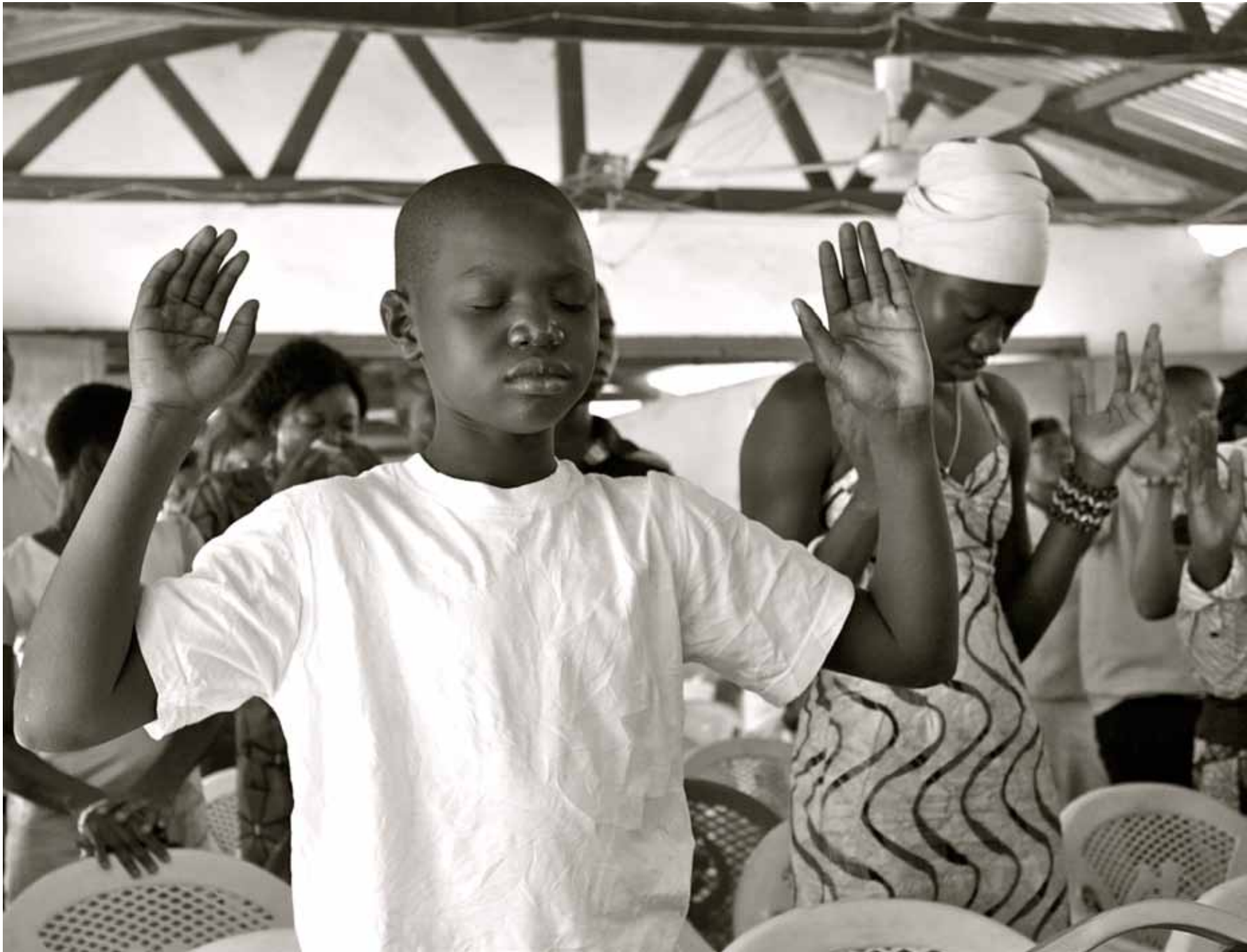
Facing page
Preaching
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone





Left
Signboard
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

Facing page
Worship
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone





Left

Posters in town

Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

Facing page

Prayer for healing, Sunday morning

Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

