

# Understanding Difficult Consumer Transitions: The In/Dividual Consumer in Permanent Liminality

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Some life transitions are difficult and prolonged, such as becoming an independent adult, forming a family, or adopting healthy consumption habits. Permanent liminality describes transitions that can span years and even a lifetime with no anticipated end. To understand how consumers are caught in permanent liminality, we examine how Pentecostal converts consume religious services in their difficult transition from the secular “world” to Pentecostalism. We draw on the concept of in/dividual personhood to explain how the Pentecostal dividual is coconstituted in an endless movement between the undesired “worldly” in/dividual and the contiguous incorporation into the desired Pentecostal in/dividual and structure. Pentecostals’ permanent liminality thus involves ongoing cycles of separation and incorporation within zones of indeterminacy, in which neither separation nor incorporation is ever completed. This theoretical framework explains the unfinished transition of Pentecostal converts as contested dividuals. We extend this theoretical explanation for future research on liquid modernity and consumers caught in permanent liminality.

**Keywords:** permanent liminality, in/dividual consumer, dividuality, transitions, religion, Pentecostalism

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*Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. (Douglas 1966, 97)*

In rites of passage, people transition from one social position to another, such as when students become graduates or immigrants become citizens (Rook 1985). Van Gennep (1909/1960) originally proposed that all rites of passage have three phases: rites of separation, rites of transition (liminality), and rites of incorporation. Many transitions follow this pattern, and goods and services often assist in these rites (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). For example, some women elect to have breast augmentation surgery to transition into womanhood (Schouten 1991). Vietnamese families exchange elaborate gifts during marriage rituals when single men and women transform into couples (Nguyen and Belk 2013). Asante families invest in funeral services to enhance the social status of deceased loved ones as they transition into the afterlife (Bonsu and Belk 2003).

Van Gennep (1909/1960) and Turner (1967, 1969) emphasized the importance of liminality as a temporary threshold, a “betwixt and between,” that people pass through as they transition from old to new cultural statuses. Liminality is temporary, and the transitions are completed. Consumer researchers extended this concept beyond rites of passage to a range of transformational consumer experiences, including vacations (Belk et al. 1989), river rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), and mountain climbing (Tumbat and Belk 2011). They stress that liminality is positive, such as when consumers escape from old social structures to experience shared feelings of *communitas*, liberation, or flow (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al. 1993).

As Douglas (1966) warns in the introductory quote, however, liminality is contingent and, thus, inherently dangerous. Tumbat and Belk (2011) similarly caution that liminal experiences are not uniformly positive and can be individualistic and competitive. Scott, Cayla, and Cova (2017) even show how liminality can be painful, such as when consumers seek out extreme physical experiences (see also Schouten 1991).

Although liminality is theorized as temporary, it can persist when transitions endure. Though not specifically drawing on the concept of liminality, McAlexander et al. (2014) found that former Mormons have difficulty transitioning from their past religious lives, family, and friends and sometimes feel confused and frustrated in new fields of consumption. The authors offer evidence that consumer transitions not only can last months or even years but also are ambiguous (e.g., my “soul is tied between two poles,” 870) and painful (e.g., I am “tearing in half,” 870). Similarly, Üstüner and Holt (2007) studied Turkish women and their daughters who migrated from rural villages to urban slums. The daughters struggled to transform from village girls into city girls who embodied and practiced the urban Batici lifestyle. Üstüner and Holt poignantly describe the daughters’ failed transitions as a shattered identity project because, even years later, they were neither village girls nor Batici and felt a “betwixt and between anomie” (55). Thus, transitions that stall can prolong the pain, danger, and duration of liminality.

These two studies demonstrate that some consumer transitions are difficult and persist for years or even a lifetime. In both studies, consumers did not experience transition as a temporary and positive threshold, but rather as an ongoing and painful anomie. The authors explained the difficult transitions as a failure to master field-dependent capital—resources that are specific to a social field and therefore are not transferrable to other fields. Although this is a useful perspective, organizational research shows that workers can master field-dependent capital but still face ongoing liminality. For example, business consultants in interorganizational networks master field-dependent capital but report enduring liminality because transition, with all its

ambiguity and uncertainty, is the central characteristic of their jobs (Johnsen and Sørensen 2015).

Drawing on theoretical work from sociology (Szokolczai 2000, 2017a), we theorize difficult and unending consumer transitions as “permanent liminality.” Permanent liminality is when a transitional period does not end. Though a popular concept, liminality “explains nothing. Liminality is. It happens” (Thomassen 2014, 7). Liminality defines a temporary phase, so when it endures, permanent liminality is an anomaly that demands explanation. How does liminality become permanent? Szokolczai (2000) invoked broad historical shifts to argue that liminality is a permanent condition of modernity. He introduced a provocative societal-level concept but did not explain how individual consumers might get caught in permanent liminality. For consumers, permanent liminality requires explanation because it may be harmful. Dangers exist for consumers who are caught in liminality, such as the painful anomie of the young migrants in Üstüner and Holt’s (2007) study.

In this research, we focus on consumers caught in permanent liminality and draw on a nondualistic concept of in/dividual personhood to explain these difficult transitions. Researchers have called for new conceptualizations of the self that avoid mind/body dualisms (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Scott, Martin, and Schouten 2014; Scott et al. 2017). We adopt and refine the concept of “in/dividuality” from anthropological and cross-disciplinary studies of Christianity (Pyne 2011; Strathern 1988; Werbner 2011). This notion of personhood assumes that consumers are both self-authored *individuals* with stable and bounded core selves and multiauthored *dividuals* who are social composites with permeable boundaries. In/dividuality provides a more holistic perspective of the consumer-as-person that encapsulates psychological assumptions of the consumer-as-agentic-self and the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective of the consumer-as-cultural-agent. We empirically demonstrate that the concept of in/dividuality plays an important role in explaining the repetitive cycles of separation and incorporation that typify difficult consumer transitions.

What are the processes that trap consumers in permanent liminality? The context of our study is the marketization and consumption of Pentecostal Christianity in Ghana, where converts struggle with the difficult consumer transition from their “worldly” secular lives to Pentecostal “born again” Christians. In contrast with the former Mormons, whose transition eventually ends (McAlexander et al. 2014), Pentecostals’ transitions are never-ending. When consuming Pentecostal services, converts continuously and contiguously cycle between separating from diabolical forces and incorporating divine forces. Converts are in an endless transition, never fully separating or incorporating—they are permanently liminal. Religion in Ghana is a competitive consumption field in which religious organizations compete for converts. We argue that Ghanaian

Pentecostalism fosters permanent liminality to make continued consumption of church services and goods perpetually relevant.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### Liminality: From Van Gennep to Turner and Beyond

Arnold van Gennep first advanced the concept of liminality in his seminal work, *The Rites of Passage* (1909/1960), in which he classified the characteristics of different cultural ceremonies in various tribal societies. Van Gennep paid special attention to rites of passage in which he identified a common pattern of separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (postliminal). He focused on rites of separation in which the initiate is removed from society and an old social role and prepares to face trials, as well as rites of incorporation, in which the initiate returns to society and a new social role.

Victor Turner (1967), however, popularized and advanced the importance of liminality (Thomassen 2009). He stressed liminality as the critical moment in rites of passage because social order is intentionally suspended. During this stateless period of being betwixt and between, the initiate's transformation is possible because past ties are broken and new ties are yet to form. Liminality is a period of reflexivity when the initiate is tested and questions society; thus, liminality is potentially liberating and creative because the conventional rules no longer apply (Turner 1969). During the momentary suspension of safety and order, liminality also creates the potential for danger and chaos (Douglas 1966). Scholars have recently attended to the dark sides of liminality in which "anguishing situations of uncertainty can emerge" (Szokolczai 2017b, 232).

Consumer researchers widely apply the concept of liminality, often emphasizing generative aspects such as *communitas*. For example, Arnould and Price (1993, 41) found that river-rafting trips generate rites of intensification, *communitas*, personal growth, and a renewed sense of self before the individual "returns to the everyday world transformed." Similarly, Celsi et al. (1993) showed that skydivers develop sacred bonds with fellow participants and that their total absorption in their dive transcends normal experience. These studies, along with others, attest to the degree to which consumers seek and benefit from liminality in transcendental and extraordinary experiences (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Kates 2002; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Thompson and Üstüner 2015).

Two recent consumer behavior studies, however, suggest that liminal experiences can have a dark side. Tumbat and Belk (2011) found that in the extraordinary experience of climbing Mount Everest, the opposite of *communitas* can occur, in which participants fear contagion from others, feel competitive and even hostile, and are distracted

by social interactions. Scott et al. (2017) examined participants in Tough Mudder events—races through mud with military-style obstacles—and found that racers enter a liminal state in which the mud itself symbolizes transformation. A fundamental aspect of this extraordinary consumer experience, nevertheless, is the suffering of a great deal of pain.

Prior studies suggest that these liminal experiences—both good and bad—are only temporary and get resolved during the postliminal stage. Recent research, however, shows that transformations during the liminal stage may be unsuccessful, such as when pilgrims fail to incorporate and return to their (preliminal) lives (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). In the current research, we explore the notion of permanent liminality, in which the consumer is stuck in the transitional phase and never solidly arrives at the postliminal phase. Thus, the dark side of liminality, including anguishing uncertainty (Szokolczai 2017b), is ongoing for unfortunate consumers who find themselves in this infinite space.

### Permanent Liminality

Liminality is a transitional phase, so permanent liminality is paradoxical (Johnsen and Sørensen 2015; Szokolczai 2000). Nevertheless, Van Gennep (1909/1960, 15, 29) foreshadowed this possibility by suggesting that certain people (i.e., monks and travelers) and places (i.e., borders and landmarks) may be permanently liminal. Similarly, Turner (1969) anticipated that liminality could become institutionalized as permanent and fixed. Both theorists, however, clearly defined liminality as a temporary transitional period.

Szokolczai (2000, 212) first introduced permanent liminality to describe transitional situations that are anticipated to be temporary but persist. Thomassen (2009) advanced these ideas by conceptualizing liminalities as ranging on a temporal continuum from the short term to persistent to permanent. Although we focus only on individual consumers, he considered how individuals, groups, and society might undergo liminalities across these time frames. Short-term or episodic liminality is closest to the original theorization of rites of passage in which liminality is temporary (Turner 1967; Van Gennep 1909/1960). Episodic liminality becomes persistent, Thomassen argues, when incorporation stalls. Persistent liminality is more indefinite but anticipated to end, as is the case of critical life-stage transitions, such as preadolescents (twens) who are no longer children but are not yet teenagers, being neither and both (Cody and Lawlor 2011). If liminality persists unendingly, it can become permanent. Permanent liminality can last a lifetime, as in the case of refugees or ethnic groups struggling for acceptance by majority groups. How, though, do people get trapped in permanent liminality?

Prior research identifies two possible explanations. First, similar to van Gennep and Turner, Szokolczai (2000) assumes that transitions are linear, moving across the stages of preliminal, liminal, and postliminal. He argues that permanent liminality occurs when any of van Gennep's (1909/1960) transitional phases freezes before it is completed, "as if a film stopped at a particular frame" (213). For Szokolczai, liminality is permanent when people in transition are trapped at the separation stage like monks, at the liminal phase like patients who are terminally ill (Ho et al. 2013), or at the incorporation stage like citizens following the Arab Spring (Georgsen and Thomassen 2017). Szokolczai's ideas are provocative, but he does not explain what causes the transition to freeze at any one stage for individuals or groups, nor does he conceptualize permanent liminality as a repetitive cycle experienced as people try to make a transition. Both issues are relevant to consumer behavior, because consumers often endeavor to change status, behaviors, and circumstances but find themselves permanently locked in transitional processes, never reaching a resting status in their desired identity.

A second explanation assumes that transitions can become permanent because people are caught in a repetitive cycle, constantly moving between transitional states (i.e., a nonlinear movement back and forth between states). For example, organizational actors constantly shift between different organizational roles in which liminality becomes routinized in their job (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000; Czarniawska and Mazza 2003; Ybema, Beech, and Ellis 2011). Similarly, global nomads experience permanent liminality as they frequently relocate to different geographic areas for work (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012). Recently, Nakata et al. (2019) examined how consumers managing chronic illnesses struggle to adhere to their treatment plans. They argue that chronically ill consumers get trapped in "existential liminality" as they go back and forth between states of compliance and noncompliance.

These explanations, however, tend to overlook the practices of separation and incorporation that are vital to the success or failure of the transition. In addition, liminality is conceptually defined as being betwixt and between, which is inconsistent with freezing at the separation or incorporation stage. Similarly, if a person moves between states, at any point in time, he or she is in one state (i.e., compliance) or the other (i.e., noncompliance), not caught in liminality. Although prior research provides useful explanations for why liminality may become permanent, we aim to refine this theorization with regard to difficult consumer transitions.

We take an ethnographic approach to understanding individual consumers' experiences of permanent liminality as sustained by institutional practices. We aim to understand how the structures and practices of separation and incorporation trap consumers in permanent liminality. We

argue that understanding the processes of permanent liminality at this micro level requires a theorization of personhood that is nondualistic and can account for both stability and change. This theorization results in insights into why consumers can become perpetually stuck in transition. We employ the concept of personhood as in/dividual, to account for both the agency of the self-authoring individual and the social cocreation and multiauthoring of the dividual.

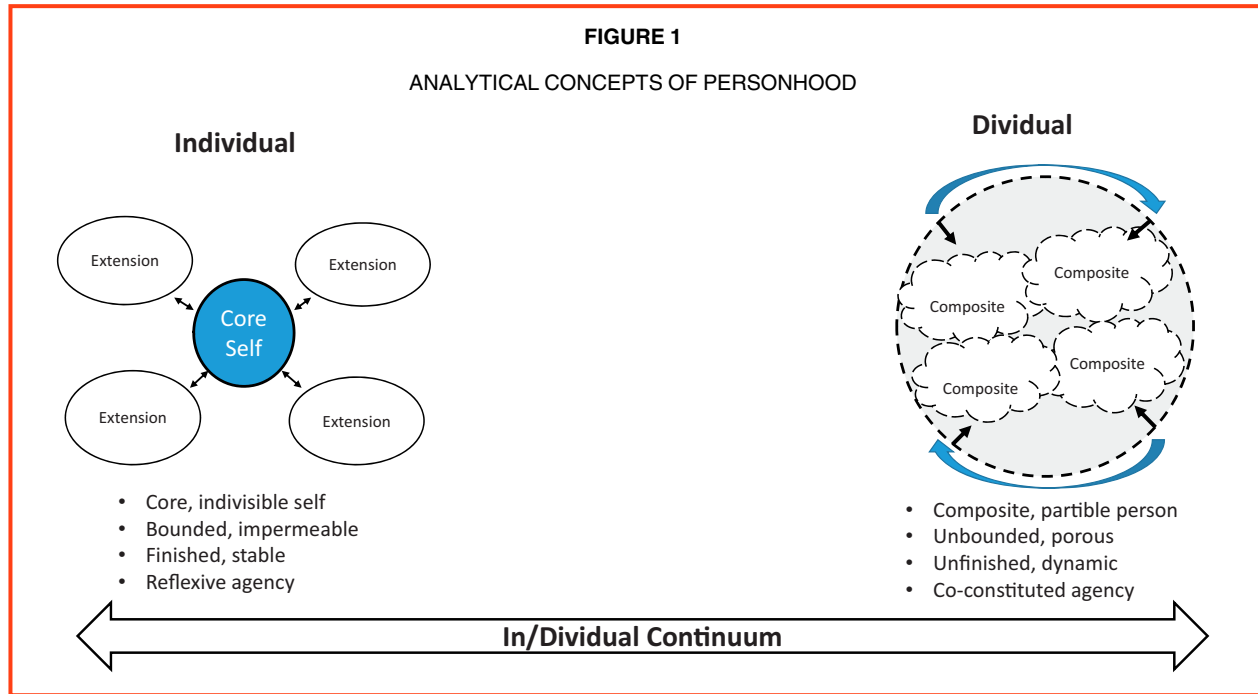
## The In/Dividual Personhood

*Personhood versus the Individual Self.* At the end of the twentieth century, anthropologists argued that while people are all self-aware, they do not always experience this awareness as an individual "self." The notion of the individual self is a predominantly Western understanding of personhood (Belk 1988). Anthropologists maintain that this Western notion of the self is a distorted lens through which to view the ethnographic "other" (Dumont 1965; LiPuma 1998). They regard the self as a useful construct—but a fiction—created by researchers for explanatory discourses. In practice, "there are only persons. Selves are grammatical fictions, necessary characteristics of person-oriented discourses" (Harré 1998, 4). As a result, anthropologists often adopt the concept of personhood, or "the state or condition of being a person," as an open analytical category that manifests differently across cultures (Fowler 2004, 4). Thus, the Western individual is just one cultural understanding of personhood among many (Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985); it is useful in understanding many consumer behaviors but falls short of explaining many others.

Drawing from ethnographic research on Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian cultures, anthropologists have theorized a different type of personhood called the "dividual" (Marriott 1976; Mosko 2010; Smith 2012; Strathern 1988). In contrast with the notion of the individual, the dividual person is "a social microcosm...constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced" it (Strathern 1988, 13). For example, Filipinos use an egg metaphor to intuitively describe their sense of personhood as dividuals in contrast with the Western individual: "Westerners are individual fried eggs whose edges do not touch; Filipinos are eggs fried together so that their whites blend, leaving a pattern of yolks embedded in a wider field" (McKay 2010, 487).

This concept of the person as a plural composite is popular in New Melanesian ethnography and cross-disciplinary work on Christianity, but there is significant variety in how different theorists define and use this concept. Next, we review and build on these various definitions and propose a formal definition to make this concept more analytically useful.





*The In/dividual Continuum.* Individual and dividual notions of personhood can be fruitfully theorized as a continuum (Mosko 2010). We use the term “individuality” to capture the Western concept of personhood that has an indivisible core and clear boundaries and in which social relationships are separate and exteriorized (Fowler 2004). We employ the term “dividuality” to capture a concept of personhood that is composite and has porous boundaries and in which social relationships are embedded and interiorized (Ram 1994).

Figure 1 illustrates our unique refinement of these notions to define the analytical end points of individuality and dividuality. Different theorists use different terminology, stress some components over others (e.g., emphasizing partibility or permeability), ignore other dimensions (i.e., agency), or disagree whether the concept is categorical or continuous. We offer our integration and codification of these ideas. At one extreme, the individual consists of a core, indivisible self that is relatively stable. Similar to a more biological understanding of the body, the individual has clear boundaries between inside and outside. The individual’s core self is not only separate and bounded but also inaccessible to others. Taylor (2007, 27) calls this notion of the individual a “buffered self.” It is also precisely because the self is bounded that social others and objects can be only “extensions” and not composites (Belk 1988; Smith 2012). The individual is self-determined, agentic, and able to reflexively consider alternative choices.

At the other extreme, the dividual is composite and partible (LiPuma 1998). Notably, the dividual is not a subject

or “self” separated from the world of objects. There is a “refusal to abstract the individual from the social relations” (Rohatynskyj 2015, 320). The dividual consists of different substances of various origins. These substances existed before and are independent of the dividual (Smith 2012), but a substance can “take us over, we can fall into its field of force” (Taylor 2007, 34). These force fields include cultural scripts, knowledge, power hierarchies, gender expectations, technology, and so on. While these forces can influence individuals, they do not happen *to* the dividual but instead work *through* the dividual. The dividual may be a composite of multiple social relations, but it is cached in a body that is porous to external relationships and continuously restructures its composite parts (Pype 2011; Ram 1994). As such, the dividual person is more fluid and is reconstituted more dynamically in different settings and contexts (Rohatynskyj 2015; Smith 2012). The dividual is thus a contingent person, or what Hoffer (1973, 3) calls an “incurable unfinishedness.”

This concept of the dividual is similar to perspectives found in CCT that challenge a reliance on the psychological agentic (individual) self and instead propose other notions of the multiauthored self and the consumer as a cultural agent (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Karababa and Ger 2011). Dividuality differs from such CCT perspectives, however, because it is conceptualized as an extreme manifestation of a personhood that lacks a sense of self and is contingently composite and partible. A CCT perspective assumes a multiauthored self that is embedded in social relations; the dividual interiorizes social relations as

composites (see [figure 1](#)). In addition, the concept of in/dividuality provides an explanation for human subjectivity and agency by conceptualizing the subject as manifesting in a continuum from controlled and bounded (individuality) to permeable and unbounded (dividuality). In short, in/dividuality offers a comprehensive understanding of the consumer-as-person, providing a useful bridge between psychological perspectives of the core self and the CCT perspective of the multiauthored self.

In some contexts, people are more individual, and in others, they are more dividual. Across cultures, however, people are neither purely individual nor purely dividual; they are more or less individual *and* dividual depending on their socialization and the context ([Englund and Leach 2000](#); [Pype 2011](#); [Smith 2012](#)). Even when they act alone or as part of a community, people are still more or less individual and dividual. However, researchers do not theorize specific situations in which either individuality or dividuality is more salient. Our research uses the context of religious transitions to begin to address this gap. We employ the in/dividual continuum to explain the permanent liminality of difficult consumer transitions. During transition, we show how the contingent dividual is caught in liminality between the in/dividuality of the old structure (the secular world) and the in/dividuality of the new structure (the religious world). To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to explain the process of permanent liminality using the in/dividual continuum of personhood. We draw on the concept of personhood to better address the question: What is the process by which consumers are caught in permanent liminality?

## THE MARKETIZATION OF PENTECOSTALISM IN GHANA

Scholars are increasingly examining religion and spirituality as commodities that are marketed, sold, and consumed ([McAlexander et al. 2014](#); [Rinallo, Scott, and Maclaran 2013](#)). No religious movement evinces the marketization of religion better than Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity. Detailed typologies of global Pentecostal and Charismatic movements can be found elsewhere ([Anderson 2010](#)). For simplicity, we use the terms “Pentecostal” and “Pentecostalism” to denote a family resemblance across these transnational manifestations ([Smith 2010](#)). Although local adaptations flourish, in general, a Pentecostal is someone who is baptized with the Holy Spirit to purify the believer to receive divine gifts and experience God ([Anderson 2000, 2010](#)). All share in the belief that the Holy Spirit acts in the here and now, often evoking ecstasy among believers during worship. Pentecostals believe that salvation redeems them from sin as they become “born again” into the Pentecostal community ([Anderson 2010](#)). This religion affirms a prosperity

gospel that encourages the pursuit of material wealth and conspicuous consumption as evidence of God’s blessings ([Haynes 2012](#); [Maxwell 1998](#)).

A conservative estimate puts this group at more than 545 million people worldwide ([Pulitzer Center 2018](#)). Pentecostalism is prospering and spreading in North America, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and Africa. This expansion is part of a historical shift in which Christianity is growing in the global south ([Pew Center 2011](#)). [Cox \(1995, 102\)](#) aptly refers to Pentecostalism as a “religion made to travel.” The ideas have broad appeal (i.e., health and wealth), and the practices are portable (e.g., giving testimony, laying on of hands, abstaining from alcohol and tobacco). Wherever this religion spreads, its charismatic practices are distinctive and its materialistic orientation appealing ([Gifford 2004](#)).

Pentecostalism’s expansion into Africa is unlike earlier religious expansions, such as Catholicism and Protestantism, which stressed eschatological aspirations ([Robbins 2003](#)). Pentecostalism asserts a neoliberal agenda by marketing God as the ultimate solution to all material needs ([Maxwell 1998](#)). Countries in sub-Saharan Africa, which were reeling from mass poverty and political instability in the 1970s, underwent a Pentecostal revolution; many young entrepreneurs started Pentecostal churches and sold the promises of health and wealth to the many poor and afflicted ([Gifford 2004](#); [Kalu 2008](#)). “The good news in Africa, Pentecostal preachers declare, is that God meets all the needs of people, including their spiritual salvation, physical healing, and other material necessities” ([Anderson 2000, 26](#)).

Ghana is a very religious country, and Christianity is the largest religion, representing 71% of the country’s population ([Ghana Statistical Service 2012](#)). Retail shops boldly proclaim their religious allegiance with names such as “God is Good Enterprise” and “God Will Make a Way Supermarket.” Pentecostalism dominates the religious landscape in Ghana at 47% of religious affiliations ([Pulitzer Center 2018](#)). Pentecostal pastors compete with Muslim mallams and traditional healers who offer a wide array of services, including interpreting dreams, curing sickness and infertility, and offering spiritual interventions to help adherents secure work visas, win business contracts, and find marital partners. The promotion of these religious services dominates Ghana’s media space, as churches employ mass and social media to attract consumers ([Meyer 2012](#)). Some preachers set up shop in the traditional marketplace, others market their services on public buses, and still others go door to door. In short, Ghana embraces the marketization of religion ([Bonsu and Belk 2010](#)).

Our context of Pentecostal religion is a consumption field ([McAlexander et al. 2014](#)). We focus on conversion and loyalty to Pentecostalism in this fiercely competitive religious market. We examine how permanent liminality

sustains the continuous consumption of Pentecostal services as part of an unfinished identity project that keeps members committed. We explain how the unfinished Pentecostal dividual is coconstituted in an endless separation from the undesired in/dividuality embedded in the dangerous world and the contiguous incorporation into the desired in/dividuality embedded in the safe world of the sacred church.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

We conducted an ethnographic study of two Pentecostal churches in Kumasi, Ghana, that we call Praise Church and Ablaze Church (pseudonyms). Praise is a small and more traditional Pentecostal church in which everyone knows one another, while Ablaze is a mega-church in which thousands of strangers worship.

During a two-month visit in 2013, we explored the viability of the study, collected preliminary interviews and field notes, and solidified our focus. We were curious as to why the religious poor make dramatic sacrifices, such as forgoing food to make financial donations to God. The second visit in 2014 spanned five months and was a full field immersion. Here, we identified themes of an enchanted marketplace in which spiritual battles are commonplace. After exiting the field, we excavated an underlying Pentecostal worldview with intriguing ideas around personhood. The third visit in 2017 lasted five weeks and consisted of follow-up interviews to refine this emerging interpretation. This study and the informed consent procedures were approved by a university human ethics committee.

### Negotiating Researcher Positionality

*Praise Church.* We selected Praise because the congregation is mostly poor and our initial interest was in understanding their sacrifices. The church conducts services in the dominant local language, *twi*, making the sermons attractive to poor Ghanaians who are often illiterate and do not speak English—the country’s official language.

To explain the merits of the study, the lead author first met with Pastor Boateng and his wife, Vicky, and then with the full church leadership. Concerns arose with the interview questions asked, issues of confidentiality, and the use of the data, which we addressed by sharing consent forms and interview protocols. This quote captures the negotiation of the lead researcher’s positionality through building a common bridge of understanding:

I also presented myself as an insider, a fellow Ghanaian from a low-income family, who has been fortunate to gain the opportunity to study abroad and who is now looking for a place to collect data to earn my degree. This resonated well with them, and I could sense they were deeply satisfied

by the realization that giving me access was an exercise of altruism toward someone they could identify with. . . . [Also this insight] was important to make my participants see that I was one of them. (field notes November 7, 2013)

Pastor Boateng presented the researcher to the congregation the following Sunday as a student researcher who was a “good person” worthy of their trust. **We conducted 34 formal interviews with 20 informants, as well as many informal interviews that were captured in field notes.**

*Ablaze Church.* Ablaze holds a large and popular open prayer service that welcomes people from all denominations who want to pray together. Its membership is a mixture of low- and middle-income members, and meetings are conducted in both English and *twi*. An “all-night” main service (10 P.M.–6 A.M.) is held fortnightly in a 12,000-capacity stadium with an overflow of approximately 8,000 additional attendees. These services are broadcast on cable TV, and a mobile phone app is available in the App Store and on Google Play where members can remotely access live church services globally.

For our initial entry, we recruited a key informant through a personal contact. Martin, who was a church usher, explained the church’s history, structure, services, and practices and recruited the first interviewees. We contacted the church leadership by mail and through a personal contact with an administrative assistant. No reservations were expressed, and the leader, Pastor Abo, granted an interview. Participatory observations were easy within the anonymity of the stadium crowd. We gathered informal interviews and took field notes focusing primarily on the popular all-night services but also observed the daytime services. **In total, we conducted 25 interviews with 22 informants.**

### Informants and Sampling

We employed a nonprobability snowball sampling strategy using gatekeepers who vouched for the researcher (Noy 2008). At Praise, Pastor Boateng identified seven initial members who lived financially precarious lives. At Ablaze, Martin identified five people who were regular members. At both sites, the first author identified more informants through informal interviews. **Table 1** lists the informants, demographics, church affiliations, and members’ involvement. We purposely sampled informants across various levels of involvement, including new, committed, dissatisfied, and former members.

We compensated informants with US\$4—double the minimum wage for a day’s work (Ghana.gov.gh). We reasoned it was important to generously compensate low-income participants for time away from critical livelihood activities. We interviewed most informants in their homes; interviews ranged from 75 to 260 minutes (averaging two hours) and were audio recorded and transcribed.

**TABLE 1**  
INFORMANTS

Pseudonym (interviews)	Age	Gender, marital status	Job	# of kids	Church years (others)	Role	Primary church	Secondary church
<b>Praise Church</b>								
Pastor Boateng (3)	50	Male, M	Priest	3	Lifelong	Pastor	Praise	None
Vicky (1)	42	Female, M	Church mother	3	Lifelong	Leader	Praise	None
Fred (1)	46	Male, M	Petty trader	4	18 (6)	Leader	Praise	Pentecostal
Michael (1)	51	Male, M	Petty trader	4	16(4)	None	Praise	None
Martha (2)	50	Female, W	Petty trader	6	15 (3)	None	Praise	None
Addo (2)	41	Male, M	Carpenter	2	20 (9)	None	Praise	None
Janet (2)	49	Female, D	Petty trader	6	27 (3)	None	Praise	None
Samuel (2)	34	Male, M	TV repairman	0	3 (3)	None	Praise	None
Prosper (3)	56	Male, M	Storekeeper	5	29 (8)	Leader	Praise	None
Serwaa (2)	35	Female, D	Storekeeper	1	15 (4)	Singer	Praise	None
Bertha (2)	38	Female, M	Unemployed	4	4	None	Praise	None
Adom (2)	48	Male, M	Tailor	4	19 (6)	Teacher	Praise	Pentecostal
Nii (1)	45	Male, M	Truck driver	6	3	Leader	Praise	None
Nana Ama (2)	40	Female, D	Baker	4	4	None	Praise	None
Mansa (2)	44	Female, M	Unemployed	4	Lifetime	None	Praise	None
Rita (1)	50	Female, S	Petty trader	4	5	None	Praise	None
Andrew (1)	72	Male, M	Unemployed	8	8	None	Praise	None
Stacy (1)	25	Female, S	Midwife	0	11	None	Praise	None
George (1)	27	Male, S	Clerk	0	Lifetime	Leader	Praise	None
Baaba (1)	32	Female, M	Unemployed	2	6	None	Praise	None
<b>Ablaze Church</b>								
Pastor Abo (1)	47	Male, M	Pastor	2	Founder	Pastor	Ablaze	None
Owura (1)	31	Male, S	Secretary	0	8	Secretary	Ablaze	None
Margaret (1)	36	Female, S	Petty trader	1	3 months	None	Pentecostal	Ablaze
Dede (1)	44	Female, S	Petty trader	4	1.5	None	Anglican	Ablaze
Akwasi (1)	31	Male, S	Shopkeeper	1	2	None	Presbyterian	Ablaze
Comfort (1)	28	Female, S	Petty trader	0	1	None	Methodist	Ablaze
Dela (1)	34	Male, S	Shopkeeper	4	2	None	Pentecostal	Ablaze
Alice (1)	59	Female, M	Petty trader	4	2	None	Pentecostal	Ablaze
Kingsley (1)	28	Male, M	Entrepreneur	1	2	None	Methodist	Ablaze
Kafui (1)	35	Male, S	Driver	1	3	None	None	Ablaze
Paapa (1)	30	Male, M	Teacher	1	1	None	Presbyterian	Ablaze
Sandra (1)	40	Female, M	Petty trader	3	2	None	Pentecostal	Ablaze
Adela (1)	47	Female, S	Unemployed	3	>1	None	Methodist	Ablaze
Sarah (1)	29	Female, M	Student	0	3	None	Pentecostal	Ablaze
Ramsey (1)	30	Male, M	Petty trader	1	>1	None	Pentecostal	Ablaze
Maame (1)	65	Female, M	Teacher, retired	3	17	None	Catholic	Ablaze
Adobea (1)	22	Female, S	Susu collector	0	2	None	Ablaze	Pentecostal
Martin (4)	35	Male, S	Driver	1	5	Usher	Ablaze	None
Seth (1)	28	Male, S	Unemployed	0	4	Usher	Quit Ablaze	Pentecostal
Dora (1)	21	Female, S	Student	0	5	Sales	Quit Ablaze	None
Boboo (1)	34	Male, S	Car dealer	1	4	None	Pentecostal	Ablaze
Charity (1)	36	Female, S	Hair dresser	1	3	None	Pentecostal	Ablaze

## Participant Observations and Interviews

The lead researcher joined the two churches, attended meetings regularly, took field notes, and recorded sermons (with permission). He was also an active church participant, singing and dancing with the congregation, listening to sermons, donating offerings, joining in discussions, attending all-night prayer vigils, riding the church bus, buying religious items, and partaking in the pre- and postservice conviviality. Ablaze did not require an intricate negotiation of entry, as sermons are held in open stadiums delivered to thousands of people. At Praise, however, the lead author did progress from an outsider to an insider. For example, as an “outsider,” few members approached him

initially, and he was given a front church pew—a seat reserved for guests. However, by the middle of the fieldwork, he sat anywhere and casually bantered with different members. It was clear that a more insider status had been negotiated when Mansa (an informant) petitioned him to resolve a marital squabble.

We employed an open-ended interview protocol that evolved to meet the realities in the field. The protocol probed on the informants’ general life story (exploring consumption before and after conversion), their relationship with God and the church, and financial issues surrounding their livelihoods and difficult consumer trade-offs. We explored the meaning of church



donations—surprisingly, 17 separate donation funds emerged in initial interviews at Praise. Therefore, we created pictures of the different donation funds as probes to help the informants reflect more on their meanings, priorities, and accompanying rituals.

At Ablaze, our interview protocol differed slightly. Two donation funds existed that were voluntary, given the anonymity of the crowd: the “offertory” was a general donation, and the “seed” was a donation accompanying an urgent prayer request. We focused the interview on other practices, such as prayer, testimonies, and product purchases.

## Analysis

The research team’s religiosity varied from a practicing Christian to an atheist to an unaffiliated but spiritual member, which provided a diversity of worldviews used to both understand the emic perspectives and challenge the etic interpretation. Our data included field notes and recordings of services, transcriptions from audio-recorded interviews, brochures, and photographs. A professional translated and transcribed the interviews, and the lead author, fluent in *twi*, cross-checked the transcriptions for accuracy. The translator captured conversational nuances and deciphered phrases that lacked exact English translations. We used NVivo to manage and analyze the data.

We conducted an intratextual analysis to examine individual interviews in their entirety, using data-driven codes and then theory-driven codes to develop a plot for each informant. Data-driven coding allowed for broad thematic descriptions of the data, while theory-driven coding offered refinements of the codes and guided the emergence of interpretations. We developed analytic memos for each informant to aid in intertextual analysis, which helped us identify common themes (Thompson 1997). We identified recurring and differing themes across informants and tied these patterns to a theoretical framework. We explicated a lived Pentecostal worldview using a different process. We employed an a priori philosophical framework and interrogated practices for what they revealed about underlying assumptions on the nature of reality and personhood. These emerging ideas were contrasted against findings from other Pentecostal studies.

Next, we present our findings. First, we explore the Ghanaian Pentecostal worldview of spiritual warfare, which is a zone of indeterminacy contributing to permanent liminality. Second, we explore how this worldview legitimizes the converts’ endless cycle of separating from diabolical forces and incorporating divine forces.

## THE ZONE OF RADICAL INDETERMINACY

Worldviews are sets of underlying assumptions that help people justify and make sense of reality. Our Pentecostal

informants assume that the spiritual and physical reality are integrated; all nature, culture, bodies, consumption, and materiality are spirit-charged (Meyer 2012). Informants assume that supernatural forces are omnipresent, shape human events, and can materialize anywhere (Meyer 1998a). Pastor Abo of Ablaze summarizes this belief in the intertwined nature of the physical and spiritual worlds: “I believe that the physical world is governed by the spiritual world and spiritual forces control physical forces.” An informant, Adom, shares this belief when he notes: “I believe the power of God is always present.”

But evil forces also abound: “We are surrounded by so many evil things” (Paapa). As Maame notes: “God is doing good things and the devil too is doing bad things.” Although some research on the consumption of spirituality theorizes reality as a mixture of physical and spiritual forces, spiritual forces are generally considered benign (Rinallo et al. 2013). In our context, both good and evil supernatural forces abound. Informants are fighting against evil spiritual forces for their very existence—this is a matter of eternal life and death.

Pentecostals, therefore, find themselves in a zone of radical indeterminacy in which the world is uncertain and ambiguous; both good and evil spiritual forces are always at play, and at any moment, either can physically manifest. This is a worldview of “ontological indeterminacy” (Greco and Stenner 2017, 152); reality can always be both and/or either. In Pentecostal parlance, this zone of radical indeterminacy is called “spiritual warfare,” which is the ongoing battle among the divine and diabolical spirits for supremacy over the convert’s life. The Pentecostal Christian God is the hero whose victory is inevitable. Pentecostals are on God’s side, the good side, the winning side. Informants believe that good Pentecostals can be prosperous, happy, and protected from illness and untimely deaths. The villains are the devil and a supporting cast of indigenous malevolent forces, such as “the power of darkness and evil forces” (Alice), “witches and evil spirits” (Amanda), and people who have “an evil eye” (Margaret). All non-Pentecostals are on the devil’s side, the bad side, the losing side. Informants believe non-Pentecostals suffer poverty, misery, illness, and untimely deaths. The devil comes “to steal, kill and destroy everyone” (Adobea). In this warfare, people must either choose God’s side or become prey for the evil side. As Dela cautions, “If you as a person don’t go to church and you don’t worship God, you are like an empty can; the devil can take you free of charge.”

In spiritual warfare, *kratophany*—the twin devotion and fear of the power of the sacred—is lessened because informants can differentiate the sources of bad and good sacred powers: bad sacred powers emanate from the devil, and good sacred powers emanate from God (Belk et al. 1989; Fernandez, Veer, and Lastovicka 2006). Indeterminacy still exists, however, because informants believe that both God’s good power and the devil’s evil

power can manifest in any person, place, or thing at any moment. Discerning between good and evil is thus tricky in a world of radical indeterminacy.

As a result, Pentecostals are highly reflective and scrutinize their everyday lives for evidence of God's divine manifestations and interventions. Our informants' lived spirituality anticipates the work of God—they expect the unexpected and have a “deep craving for God's surprises” (Smith 2010, 65). Consider the indeterminacy in Michael's mundane choice of a bus to ride:

There was a time I was going to town and I was just standing by the roadside waiting for a bus to board. It had rained and one bus just splashed water on those of us standing there and the same bus stopped for passengers to board. I refused to board the bus, not because of the water it splashed, but I just didn't feel like boarding it. That bus left and then I boarded another one. Along the way, we realized that the bus that we didn't board earlier has collided with another car. When I saw that, I asked whether I didn't board the bus because of the water splash or it is God who spoke to me. That is when I realized that God talks to us, because there were many of us by the roadside looking for a vehicle, so why didn't I board that bus? So I know that when I pray, God listens and reveals things to us.

When making sense of their lives, our informants are aware of, and deliberate on, proximate causes. Informants, however, mostly attribute positive experiences to divine intervention. All informants used divine intervention to explain countless “God surprises,” both small and large, such as customers buying their wares (Fred), receiving a job promotion (Prosper), getting married (Sarah), having a safe childbirth (Serwaa), doing well in school (George), becoming a homeowner (Martha), receiving gifts (Mansa), and recovering from illness (Nii), to name only a few.

Informants also expect that the devil and evil spirits can always harm them. Our informants blame evil spiritual forces for mishaps (Alice's car accident), bad experiences (Adela's complications during pregnancy), and strange events (Paapa's experience with a mysterious broom sweeping by itself at night). This radical indeterminacy emerges in the most common consumption activities, such as riding a bus or eating. Bertha notes that “the devil does some of these things through the food we eat; some people can put something into the food that they will give you so when you eat it, you can be in trouble.” Food is indeterminate—it can nourish or destroy the body. Meyer (1998a) similarly found that Pentecostals believed the devil inhabits second-hand clothes, making the users sick.

In this spiritual warfare, where the manifestations of God and the devil are as certain as they are indeterminate, Pentecostal religious services are critical for safeguarding converts' well-being. This Pentecostal worldview of indeterminacy legitimizes and produces the need for continuous separation from all that invites evil in and, at the same

time, a continuous incorporation with all that draws good near. We interpret this need for endless separation and incorporation as the permanent liminality of the unfinished Pentecostal.

## PERMANENT LIMINALITY AND THE UNFINISHED DIVIDUAL

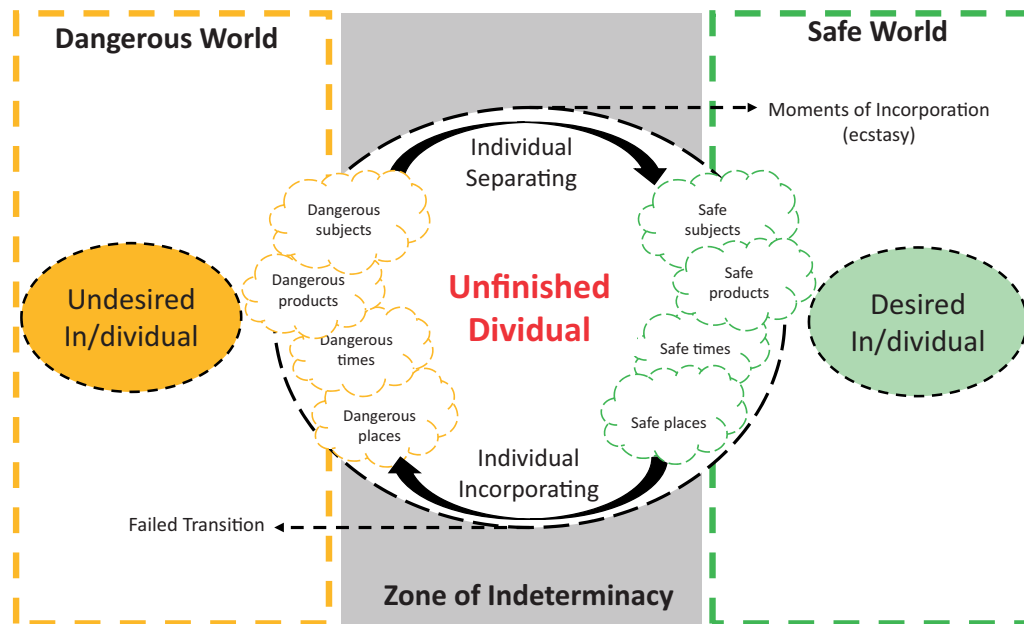
In *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep (1909/1960) explored how new Christians undergo the initiation rite of baptism, which both separates them from their past sinful states and incorporates them into the new state of born-again Christians. When people convert to Pentecostalism, they also must separate from the dangerous and sinful world of the secular and incorporate into the safe world of the Pentecostal church. For Pentecostals, however, baptism is merely a first step in a transition that does not end, given the need for endless cycles of separation and incorporation. Figure 2 offers a didactic snapshot of the processes that we explore empirically using the conceptual lens of in/dividual personhood.

In figure 2, the zone of indeterminacy contains both evil and good spiritual forces that may physically appear in people and objects anywhere and at any moment; this is where the spiritual warfare unfolds. Our Pentecostal informants exercise the agency of their individuality to separate from the dangerous world of subjects, products, times, and places that belong to their past undesired in/dividuality and then strive to incorporate the safe world of subjects, products, times, and places to achieve their desired in/dividuality. Informants talk about an ideal Pentecostal who lives a “righteous” (Sarah), “pure” (Stacy), and “holy” (Prosper) life to which they are striving to transition. Martin puts it best when he says, “To live a holy life means you are *separating* yourself from sin; I know this is a sin and it's against God, so I won't do it.” Sin is the emic Christian concept of the transgression of the boundaries between the dangerous diabolical and the safe divine. Unlike the oft-celebrated blurring of boundaries between the sacred and profane (Belk et al. 1989; Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011), in this context, Pentecostals undertake strict boundary work to cleave the dangerous “world” from the safe church.

Informants never achieve a transition to their desired in/dividuality, however, for two related reasons. First, their spiritual conversion is an initial defection from the dangerous “worldly” realm of the devil to the safe world of “God's army.” But the larger war—a war that never ends—must be fought continuously because “the devil's eyes are on every child of God, and he is ready to always drag them back and take them into his kingdom” (Amanda). As we show next, in this zone of indeterminacy, separation does not end with conversion because the ensnaring world of dangerous subjects, times, products,

FIGURE 2

## THE PERMANENT LIMINALITY OF THE UNFINISHED DIVIDUAL



and places is omnipresent and the convert must continuously choose a righteous path in the face of temptation. Second, Pentecostals' successful incorporation into God's safe army of the Pentecostal church involves the continuous consumption of church services, which is precarious and difficult to sustain because church services are not constantly available. Importantly, this continuous incorporation is contingent on the *parallel* processes of successfully separating from the dangerous worldly realm. In this spiritual warfare, the war is always fought on two fronts.

In figure 2, our Pentecostal informants therefore are more unfinished dividuals (in the middle) who are composites of both the dangerous world they are unsuccessfully separating from and the safe world they are attempting to incorporate. Thus, they are in permanent liminality, caught between their former undesired in/dividuality and their desired in/dividuality. Some converts return to the dangerous world when they stop trying to separate from evil and incorporate good. Others have moments of ecstasy when they incorporate with God, as we show subsequently. Most converts, however, are caught in permanent liminality, unsuccessfully completing the transition to divine in/dividuals who completely choose a righteous life and are composites of God.

In summary, we find that our Pentecostal informants' incorporation into their desired personhood of "holy" Pentecostals is done continuously and contiguously with their separation from their undesired personhood in the

dangerous world (see cyclical arrows in figure 2). We argue, therefore, that they are in permanent liminality, as neither separation nor incorporation is ever completed. This finding challenges permanent liminality as a stalled transition (Szakolczai 2000) or a sequential movement between stages (Nakata et al. 2019) and implicates the ongoing simultaneous processes of separation and incorporation (Turner 1969). We offer empirical evidence to support our theoretical explanation, across four spiritual battlefields of subjects, times, products, and marketplaces.

### Permanent Liminality on the Battleground of Subjects

The spiritual and the physical worlds are intertwined, but social reality is divided in important ways. The Pentecostal's sociality is rhetorically split into nonbelievers, who are of the dangerous world and its evil forces, and believers, who are born again and of God. Nevertheless, all subjects are ambiguous composites of good and evil spiritual forces that can manifest anytime and anywhere. We focus on the Pentecostal informants' personhood as they transition from "the world" to the church. Our unit of analysis here is therefore not the secular or church community but the Pentecostal person and his or her relation to these communities in the transition process.

*All Subjects Are Indeterminate.* After conversion, Pentecostals must break from the dangerous social ties of their worldly in/dividuality and incorporate safe social ties of the church (see figure 2). Nevertheless, this process must be continuous because, though they aim to incorporate into the safer world of believers, they still live in the dangerous sociality of nonbelievers. They are still members of extended families, interact with disagreeable cotenants and work colleagues, and meet strangers in the marketplace, all of whom are indeterminate subjects who may be composites of divine or diabolical forces.

For example, initiates in Ndembu, after attaining new social roles in transition rituals, are incorporated into their old community (Turner 1967), but it is unclear how successfully they negotiate their new social identities in relation to their old sociality. After conversion, our informants similarly continue to live in the broader social world beyond the church, but they consider themselves separate from their past “worldly” social ties and work continuously to keep them separate (see also Pye 2011). Quoting the Bible, Pastor Boateng advises his congregation, “We live in the world, but we are not part of the world.”

Even fellow Pentecostals are indeterminate because they are potentially composites of divine or diabolical forces. As Bertha explains, “We human beings have given the devil a chance to operate through us, so the devil uses the same people we relate with and even are in church with. It’s not everybody that goes to church that is good.” Bertha argues that some church members invite the devil through sinful acts such as social competition, judgment, gossip, and greed, which are antithetical to the holy Pentecostal seeking to incorporate with God. Thus, church members must scrutinize not only their own lives but also other members for evidence of dangerous composites through which the devil can permeate and harm porous converts. Bertha’s observations highlight the endless task of identifying dangerous worldly subjects and separating from them, even while converts are incorporating with the church and God.

*Separation from the Dangerous Extended Family.* Historically, Ghanaians worshiped ancestors before the spread of Christianity (Meyer 1998b; Onyinah 2002). The extended family system persists today, and ancestral kinship ties are culturally venerated. Prior consumer research also celebrates the family as an important anchor of consumer identity (Epp and Price 2008) and a source of social support during adversity (Nakata et al. 2019). People consume to draw the family closer and may even feel guilty when outsourcing some family care to the marketplace (Epp and Velagaleti 2014). Pentecostalism, however, challenges these ties to the extended family and ancestors as composites of a dangerous pre-Pentecostal sociality (Piot 2010). Contact with family opens the porous dividual convert to malignant and powerful ancestral forces. Adela

explains this by referring to a popular local proverb that “there is a *Mensah* [evil person] in every family.” The Akan tribe of Ghana believes witches only harm other family members (Onyinah 2002).

The *Mensah* in Dede’s family is her mother. Since childhood, Dede has had a strained relationship with her mother—they quarrel regularly. Dede believes her mother is a witch who is responsible for her son’s convulsions, which typifies the ageism and sexism common in witchcraft accusations made against older women in sub-Saharan Africa (Crampton 2013). Dede scapegoats her mother as an aggressor who has inflicted illness on her son; she has consulted with different pastors who concur with her diagnosis. Her son provides additional evidence: “I do dream and see myself eating and walking with my grandmother, then I become sick the next morning.” Like many African Christians, Ghanaian Pentecostals believe that dreams are portals between events in the spiritual world that have not yet manifested in the physical world (Charsley 1992). Dede argues that her mother is jealous of her business acumen, as they compete in selling hardware in the traditional market. Dede believes her mother uses her witchcraft to sicken her grandson, sending him to the hospital and forcing Dede to siphon money for medical bills that might have been used to grow her business. Intergenerational conflict over economic resources can influence the young to accuse the older of using witchcraft to gain advantage, as Dede alleges (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Dede separates from her evil and worldly mother, refuses her dangerous gifts, and prays to incorporate God’s protection for her son and business.

At both churches, Pentecostal religious services also act as an all-out spiritual battle to excise these family and ancestral ties from the dividual person. At Ablaze, services use the power of “red-hot” prayer to counter these ancestral “blood curses.” For example, Pastor Abo leads thousands of members in what are called “offensive” prayers to expel these malevolent forces. The following excerpt is a call and response prayer led by Pastor Abo; at the end, the crowd’s responses crescendo to a thunderous level:

Pastor Abo: Let’s continue to pray. All witchcraft powers.

Congregation: All witchcraft powers!

Pastor Abo: In my mother’s family lineage.

Congregation: In my mother’s family lineage!

Pastor Abo: Challenging my God-ordained destiny.

Congregation: Challenging my God-ordained destiny!

Pastor Abo: Die!

Congregation: Die!!! (field notes, November 11, 2014)

Offensive prayers, such as this call and response, are accompanied by clapping, shouting, and marching with strength and determination against these evil forces. This separation from traditional structures, like the family, is



necessary for transitioning to a Pentecostal identity—the old must make way for the new (Turner 1967). At the fortnightly prayer services, members invoke these ancient ancestral ties and, paradoxically, make these ancestral forces even more relevant by fighting them in the present. Members also rage against other non-Pentecostal subjects, including work colleagues, competitors, cotenants, neighbors, friends, ex-lovers, or anyone who might use diabolical forces to wreak havoc. In this spiritual battle, prayer is the “weapon” of choice for separating dangerous ties of the undesired worldly in/dividual. Boboo explains the power of prayer: “even the devil is afraid to come near you because he feels there is a hedge of fire around you so he is even afraid to touch you with his evil hands.” Recurrent prayers create a “hedge of fire” to protect converts from any dangerous sociality that may enter their permeable bodies.

*Incorporation into the Safe Church Family.* This separation from various indeterminate subjects is accompanied by a contiguous incorporation into the church community to become the idealized “holy” Pentecostal in/dividual. The majority of informants who attend Ablaze’s stadium services are also members of their primary, smaller churches that provide critical social support (see table 1). Here, the Pentecostal converts are disciplined into the born-again life through a series of round-the-week church services—prayer meetings, Bible studies, social events, and choir practices—deepening their commitment to and involvement with the church (Daswani 2011; Maxwell 1998). Kinship is thus actively reconfigured from dangerous blood ties to the safe religious ties of the church community. This community becomes the converts’ new “good family” (Mansa) that rejoices in religious fellowship (McAlexander et al. 2014).

Turner (1967) argues that during initiation rites in small-scale societies, initiates are removed from social structures and become their own community in which social bonding is encouraged. Similarly, the church congregation is the central social hub in which informants make friends, socialize, share meals, and patronize one another’s businesses. Church fellowship groups meet fortnightly around common interests, such as leadership (men’s fellowship), learning how to cook new dishes (women’s fellowship), and courtship (youth’s fellowship). Men’s and women’s fellowships pool money to support members with important financial needs (e.g., the women’s fellowship gives gifts to new mothers). Praise church also provides a social safety net for members giving financial aid in times of need. Members give monthly to a welfare fund that provides support for marriages, deaths, and financial hardships within this new family. Emergency funds provide support for members who lose businesses and homes to fires, while other members receive help with rent and medical bills. The church family is thus drawn in and becomes a

composite of the poor informants who turn to the church in times of both joy and need, providing them with a critical network of reciprocity that integrates them into the group (Offer 2012).

*When Incorporation into the Church Family Fails.* Permanent liminality is institutionalized in the Pentecostal church as an ongoing spiritual warfare between God and the devil. Wins occur when members succeed in moments of fleeting separation and incorporation, such as during a prayer service when God’s presence is felt, when a member is delivered from an illness spiritually caused by his or her own family, or when a member finds a marital partner in the church. These wins are joyfully celebrated in the church with public testimonies and donations, which serve as collective encouragement to soldier on despite this permanent liminality. Ablaze, for example, has special periods during its services when members are invited to give such testimonies, which are raucously celebrated by the church collective, reinforcing their faith and hopes for more successes in the battles ahead.

Every war has casualties, and the church suffers losses when members return to their worldly in/dividuality in the dangerous world (see figure 2, failed transitions). As noted previously, Dede’s son suffers from convulsions, which she blames on her mother’s witchcraft. She nonetheless prays to God to heal her son, but his pain persists. She says, “As a Christian, when you go through trials, God delivers you from them, but mine was continuous. It honestly brought my Christian life down and my faith also became weak.” Dede stopped incorporating safe composites by refusing to go to church or meet with her pastor, and she began incorporating dangerous elements, such as heavy drinking; that is, Dede chose to leave the church and return to her worldly in/dividuality. When her business failed, however, she chose to return to God and resumed her ongoing cycle of separation and incorporation.

In some cases, the church leadership sanctions members whose transgressions reveal their slippages into the dangerous world and its immoral practices (Anderson 1979). The church separates members who fail to work to incorporate God and the church, such as those who do not regularly attend church services, skip donations, or are “immoral.” Bertha, an unmarried mother of two, says that upon the birth of her children, the church refused her a child-naming ceremony or gifts because she was “not properly married.” When unmarried Serwaa became pregnant with her son, she was also separated from her leadership roles in Praise, prohibited from singing in the choir, and confined to sit in the back pews of the church for six months.

In other cases, battles are lost when a member chooses to leave the church and return to the world permanently. At Praise, a member quit when the church did not support her financially after floods destroyed her home. The church found her in poor standing because she failed to donate to

the church's welfare fund. Seth also left Ablaze because he refused to separate from his family. He explained: "Even if my family are worldly people, I cannot pray against them, 'Die, Die, Die,' like that. Even Jesus said we should love our enemies." To the church, Seth and others are inevitable casualties of the spiritual war. As Pastor Boateng reminded his congregation in a sermon, "Many are called, but only a few will be chosen." These lost battles provide evidence that permanent liminality is precarious, and members can fail to incorporate into the church family and eventually return to the world of nonbelievers.

### Permanent Liminality on the Battleground of Time

Our informants believe that nighttime and December are particularly dangerous. Time is inescapable, and converts cannot avoid the night or the month of December as they can dangerous family members. Instead, they fight dangerous times by drawing on sacred forces concurrently. The battleground of time (and the marketplace, discussed subsequently) thus offers the clearest evidence of the contiguity of separation and incorporation practices.

*Nighttime as Indeterminate.* Ghanaian Pentecostals believe that nighttime is indeterminate because a pregnable passageway exists connecting the spiritual and physical worlds (Heuser 2009). At night, evil spiritual forces more easily permeate people in the physical world, causing harm (Onyinah 2002). At the same time, however, informants believe God's power is more accessible at night. Accordingly, informants pray to incorporate themselves in the safety of God's protection as a means to separate from the dangers of the night. Indeterminacy peaks at midnight, which is the liminal time between the passing and impending day. Adela notes that midnight is particularly dangerous without the protection of prayer: "The ideal time to start praying is from 12 o'clock midnight because that is the time the witches will be flapping their wings to fly." Pentecostal churches like Ablaze have *all-night* prayer services (10 P.M.–6 A.M.) to incorporate God on the indeterminate spiritual frontlines of nighttime.

During an all-night service at Ablaze, torrential rains soaked the large crowd that was praying in the open stadium. The lead singer then began singing a popular gospel song called "Open the Floodgates in Abundance and Cause Your Rain to Fall on Me." Not in spite of the rain but because of it, the crowd sang louder, collectively rejoicing in this divine sign. Their religious fervor grew, as thousands of near strangers swayed, prayed, and sang in a collective experience of being one with God. As the group celebrated in the middle of the night, betwixt and between the physical and spiritual worlds, this was a moment of *communitas* (Arnould and Price 1993; Turner 1969). While darkness enveloped the crowd, this joyous group was unified in their

disavowal of and separation from all that is worldly. The crowd was united in the living body of God and protected by rain sent from heaven's floodgate (field notes, September 5–6, 2014). For many, this was a state of ecstasy in which Pentecostal individuals cede control and agency, invite God to enter them, and momentarily incorporate with God (see figure 2, moments of incorporation). As Martha states: "Yes, whenever I dedicate myself wholly to pray at dawn, I do experience it and I become excited. I feel the spirit of God descends on me and I feel very active and that even compels me to get closer to God always."

When converts feel the Holy Spirit moving inside them, they fleetingly experience their desired in/dividuality, but this temporary experience of incorporation with God and the church ends when the church service finishes, and evil spirits still abound and temptations still exist. The church services help navigate the difficult journey through nighttime when "witches flapping their wings" can devour the convert. Still, the next sunset brings renewed struggles.

*December as Indeterminate.* December, especially around Christmastime, is another zone of indeterminacy when spiritual warfare intensifies. In Ghana, road accidents and deaths increase during December as travel and commercial activities increase (Adinkrah 2015). Our informants blame this fatal trend on the activities of devil and witches. Alice explains why evil spirits are more dangerous around Christmas:

As Christmas is approaching, they [evil spirits] will take you along if you don't take care. I learned a minibus had fully loaded passengers here at *Sofoline* [a suburb] when an *articulator* [big truck] ran over it and, just there, 15 people died. That is the devil at work. He is seriously at work. God wants souls and he [the devil] also wants souls, so prayer is essential for everyone during this time.

December is indeterminate and a frontline in the spiritual war. For Alice, as the year draws to a close, the accidents are a head count for souls in the battle between the devil and God.

Adela explains why the individual Pentecostal is more permeable to evil spirits during this time:

When Christmas is approaching, we human beings say to ourselves: "This goat or sheep or chicken is nice, so that's what I will kill and eat for Christmas." Just as you have targeted an animal, it's the same way a witch has targeted you: "With the way this person is looking nice this year, I will take him this Christmas." So while we have targeted an animal, they have targeted human beings and that is why I pray to God when Christmas is approaching.

Adela, as do many Ghanaians, believes that witches feast on the bodies of their victims, as is often dramatized in popular movies (Onyinah 2002). Adela thus uses the motif of Christmas feasting to explain the vulnerability of

FIGURE 3

ADS FOR WATCH NIGHT SERVICES



humans as prey for evil agents such as witches. Both Alice and Adela pray to incorporate God's protection and separate from these dangerous times when divine and evil forces are warring.

Similarly, church services increase in Ghana as Christmas approaches, as the consumers of religion seek God's protection to counteract witches' activities (Meyer 2012). New Year's Eve, especially at midnight, is a sacred period perceived by Pentecostals as the peak of spiritual warfare. Many churches organize special all-night services, popularly called Watch Night, to usher in the New Year under God's protection. Watch Night refers to Jesus's command to his disciples to "watch and pray" during the night he was arrested and crucified. Figure 3 provides examples of Watch Night ads across 2015–2017. In summary, nighttime, midnight, December, and New Year's Eve are zones of indeterminacy; Pentecostals pray to incorporate God's protection and contiguously separate from their dangers.

### Permanent Liminality on the Battleground of Consuming Products

Many religious institutions prescribe moral sanctions on what goods and services are acceptable or unacceptable for their members (Izberk-Bilgin 2012). For example, Mormons prohibit members from consuming coffee, tea, alcohol, and tobacco (McAlexander et al. 2014), while Muslims have halal-haram restrictions (Izberk-Bilgin 2012). Pentecostals demarcate products that are safe or dangerous, but some indeterminacy exists because some things (e.g., food, water) can be either, and dividual converts are permeable to both the good and evil spiritual forces that contaminate products.

*Separating Evil Products from the Body.* Both Pentecostal churches forbid dangerous consumption practices, such as listening to secular music, wearing provocative clothing, drinking alcohol, gambling, and smoking—all of which imperil the Pentecostal's dividual body through contamination and loss of control. The church warns that worldly consumption makes members susceptible to evil within this larger spiritual warfare.

Addo shares his personal experiences on the existential dangers of addictions to tobacco, alcohol, and sex that threatened his very life:

When I was *in the world*, I smoked for 10 years, from 1982 to 1992. I was drinking and womanizing as well. The Bible says when you become a Christian, you are changed into a new being. If I were still *in the world*, I could be dead by now because about 14 of my friends that I used to do that with are dead (emphasis added).

The physical dangers of smoking are well known, but Addo views smoking as a worldly composite of his pre-Pentecostal in/dividuality. He credits his very survival to separating from "the world" of evil spirits that uses tobacco and alcohol to rob people of their lives. As is developed in the discussion, recovery from addiction can be conceptualized as permanent liminality, as the former addict must be ever-vigilant of people, times, and places that could trigger a relapse. Addo continues to feel strong urges to smoke and struggles with separating from this life. He avoids "places where people smoke, or where I know if I go people will ask me to smoke." His caution reveals the porosity of the dividual body and its permeability to substances such as cigarette smoke. He thus continues to incorporate church services and prayer that buffer his body and keep him stalwart against slippages into addiction.



Adela's addiction to alcohol is an ongoing struggle. Despite becoming a Pentecostal, she still confesses to relapses:

If I tell you I don't drink, I will be lying to you; I used to drink a lot till I became sick and almost died. There is a lady who used to live here but she has moved now; she said to me, "You go to church and they say drinking is not good, but you do drink; you see, nobody forced you to stop drinking, but God made you fall sick so you will stop drinking." [laughs] Good counsel doesn't change a person—except trial; they preached and preached and preached, but I was still drinking. But these days, to be very honest with you, I drink only a little, like every once in a while [laughs].

For Adela, alcohol is an evil composite from her past worldly in/dividuality that prevents her from transitioning successfully into a holy Pentecostal in/dividual. Never fully free of her desire for alcohol, Adela's separation from the world and consequently her incorporation into Pentecostalism are unfinished. Adela believes that alcohol prohibits union with God: "If you pray to God with alcohol on your breath, it blocks your prayers from reaching God." She argues this is a moral tension because God and alcohol cannot coexist in her desired "holy" Pentecostal in/dividuality; "that's like going for dinner at someone's house when you are already full." God is poisoning her body with alcohol as a message. Nevertheless, she remains in permanent liminality: "I'm pleading with God to let me stop it once and for all."

Other informants share similar stories of continuous struggles to separate from products that are dangerous composites, including Margaret and Kingsley, who struggle with alcohol, and Adom, who struggles with gambling 19 years after conversion. Although some informants no longer feel powerful desires to consume these dangerous products, temptations persist as "the devil continues to bring these sinful thoughts, and you need to shout at him immediately to depart from your mind and start praying or go for your Bible and start studying it" (Martin). Thus, they must stay stalwart against slippages in consuming dangerous products that can jeopardize their incorporation as Pentecostals; they turn to prayer and Bible studies to counteract the danger and incorporate God.

*Incorporating Blessed Products into the Body.* O'Guinn and Belk (1989, 237) argued that when Christians shopped at Heritage Village, sacred/secular boundaries were erased, and they pondered whether this "is a prototype for religious and secular fusion in other parts of culture." Similarly, pilgrims, tourists, neo-pagans, and other consumers of spirituality purchase and consume all manner of objects, believing them to be imbued with the sacred (Rinallo et al. 2013; Turley 2009).

Pentecostal informants believe that "blessed products" have divine powers. Ablaze congregants frequently buy

FIGURE 4

BLESSED PRODUCTS PURCHASED DURING FIELDWORK



and consume these blessed products sold at the church venue, including wristbands, watches, stickers, books, handkerchiefs, water, and oil (see figure 4), creating a vibrant marketplace for these products. Not surprisingly, Pastor Abo enthusiastically approves of these sales: "I believe the [Holy Spirit's] anointing can be stored in material things and that's why we use these items." Informants trust that blessed products are detached composites of God and that using the products helps them integrate with God (and the church). Paapa illustrates how drinking Ablaze's blessed bottled water allows him to absorb the power of God:

I do drink it, my wife drinks it, and all my children drink it here. Just like I will drink water in my fridge, that is how I drink it. And then sometimes when I'm thirsty and I need to drink water and I drink it. A man of God has prayed over it, so it is now a carrier of the power of God, so when I drink it, I believe that God through it is working in me and then the power of God is also in me.

The bottled water is blessed by Pastor Abo and enriched with God's power. By ingesting the blessed water, Paapa believes he literally incorporates God into his porous body, even if this practice must be sustained with continuous consumption.

Importantly, informants consume these blessed products to simultaneously incorporate God and repel evil spirits. They apply blessed oils and water to their bodies or ingest them to treat various illnesses, which are attributed to evil forces of the dangerous world. For example, blessed water is drunk to relieve pain or illness, such as malaria, which still kills thousands of Ghanaians every year. Amanda gives this water to her mother when she is sick because "the moment I give it to her, the sickness departs and she



feels better.” Alice rubbed the oil on her leg to remove swelling, noting that “had it not been for the Ablaze oil, my leg would have been amputated.” Drinking spirit-filled water is believed to be protective: “I drink it for strength and power and protection” (Paapa). Dela also often rubs the anointing oil in his palm to protect his porous body from “people with evil hands” who may rob him of his vitality. The wristband similarly offers protection, “so that when you meet a witch, the witch can’t do anything to you because of the band” (Charity).

Through such deliberate integration of the body with these blessed products, informants open their porous bodies to become composite with God and the church that produces them, while keeping sinful products, sickness, and evil out of their bodies. Instead of an extended self (Belk 1988), the consumption of these blessed products incorporates the products and God as composites of the Pentecostal dividual in transition.

### Permanent Liminality on the Battleground of Marketplaces

*The Indeterminate Secular Marketplace and Money.* Although consumer research has long highlighted the marketplace as liminal and enchanted and consumption as magical (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk et al. 1989; Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011; Firat and Venkatesh 1995), scant research examines the market as spirit-filled (Ozanne and Appau 2019). Nigerian novelist Ben Okri (1992, 16) observed this in his famous novel *The Famished Road*: “I realized that it wasn’t just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate.” Ghanaians view the marketplace as radically indeterminate because both good and evil forces are at play (Meyer 1998a).

The secular market is filled with both indeterminate subjects and objects. For example, good customers bring economic gains, while evil customers bring losses. Kafui, a taxi driver, expects, but is wary of encountering, dangerous spirits posing as potential customers. He recounts a story of a customer “operating with evil spirits” who boarded his car and caused an “inexplicable” motor accident. Another customer requested a ride to a locale with terrible roads, causing Kafui’s car to have “strange” and costly mechanical problems. Regardless of their desires, consumers cannot escape the hegemonic market (Kozinets 2002); the market is unavoidable and inevitable. Many informants know that their livelihoods depend on this secular marketplace. Therefore, they separate from the dangers of the marketplace by simultaneously incorporating safe composites from the church whenever they are in the market. Informants regularly buy blessed products to insulate their porous dividual bodies. They use these products to also insulate their businesses against losses in the secular

marketplace and draw in the blessings of profits. Kafui, for example, rubs Ablaze’s blessed oil on his car’s steering wheel to repel evil customers from boarding his taxi. Comfort and Margaret both sprinkle blessed oil on their wares and rub it on their foreheads to increase patronage. Dede also uses Ablaze stickers to attract good customers who “buy what they didn’t intend to buy and you will make sales you never expected.” Amanda, who placed an Ablaze sticker on her shop’s door, states, “thieves broke into the other shops here, but they did not touch mine.” She brags that the stickers attract the best customers who are “prominent people who have their own cars.” Thus, the blessed objects act as contrapuntal forces, both attracting good fortune and repelling misfortune in this indeterminate marketplace.

Money is fundamental to exchange in the secular market but can also transmit evil or good. Money is sacred and therefore has kratophanous powers (Belk and Wallendorf 1990). Sandra, a petty trader, provides an explanation:

Where I’m selling food now, if you are not prayerful, someone may have evil eyes and the person can use evil money to come and buy from you. . . . Someone could be a witch. So the person may want to come and *burn* [destroy] your money. You may think it’s good money the person is using to buy, so you will collect it. But by the time you check your sales for the day, that money will not be there and all your money and business will be messed up.

Like other informants, Sandra believes that witches transmit evil through money. Tanzanian Pentecostal traders similarly believe that evil spiritual forces can siphon monies from their sales (Lindhardt 2009). The machinations of the market are mysterious because traders can bring money to the market and generate additional money, or they can lose it all. Petty trading in the informal economies of developing countries comes with extraordinary risks for the many unskilled people engaged in it, and traders often lose their business capital (Banerjee and Duflo 2011). Sandra has lost her business capital many times and understands that she can make sales but still mysteriously lose money. At the threshold of her retail shop, she sprinkles “some of the oil, or the water here, to neutralize any such spirits” who might buy her wares with evil money.

*The Indeterminate Divine Marketplace of Monetary Donations.* The church has its own sacred marketplace, where members physically separate from the dangerous world and incorporate into worship, prayer, and a new sociality through donations (as well as the sale and purchase of blessed products, as noted previously). Pentecostalism is also well known for its prosperity gospel through which adherents are encouraged to make significant monetary donations to the church in exchange for material blessings from God (Haynes 2012; Maxwell 1998). Unlike most religious movements that view the marketplace as ensnaring

(Izberk-Bilgin 2012), Pentecostalism is decidedly materialistic and pro-market, blurring any suggestion of a secular/sacred boundary between religion and the market (Bonsu and Belk 2010; Lindhardt 2009). Despite its noted indeterminacy and danger, Pentecostals believe that the market is where God materially rewards believers who make monetary donations to the church with “blessings.” Pentecostal preachers all over the world—such as David Oyedepo (Nigeria), Creflo Dollar (United States), and David Yonggi Cho (Korea)—consume conspicuously as evidence of God blessing them with large mansions and private jets (Appau and Churchill 2019). Our informants also participate in this marketplace of divine exchanges, offering donations and prayers for God’s blessings and to incorporate with God.

At Ablaze, “seed boxes” are placed prominently, inviting members to sow a “seed” with their donation and then reap the material returns (Haynes 2012). All our informants shared stories of how monetary donations to God yielded blessings. For example, Michael says: “Usually, when I give my tithe and offerings on Sundays, my goods are highly patronized, especially on Mondays. So, I like giving whenever I go to church.” Still, God’s returns are indeterminate because God reciprocates in ways that are incomprehensible (Maxwell 1998). Adom explains that blessings, like money, are fungible:

Sometimes you may give money to God and may expect to have it back in the form of money, but God may give it back in the form of giving you [a] long life. Even the ability to live for some time without going to the hospital is a blessing. Also, your children living to have good jobs to do is also part of the blessing.

Although God is obliged to return the blessing in exchange for the donation, the blessing is indeterminate (Lindhardt 2009).

Among all the possible donations that members can exchange for blessings, the tithe—a tenth of one’s income—is central to incorporating with God toward the desired Pentecostal in/dividuality. Adobea believes that “when I pay my tithe, it is like I am entering into a covenant with God, so I say ‘with this money I enter this pact with you, Lord.’” Tithed money can bind one to God, much as blood unites kin (Belk and Wallendorf 1990). Like the gift that binds both the giver and the receiver, tithing and other monetary donations in the church marketplace tie informants to God (Mauss 1925/1990; Sherry 1983).

However, even monetary donations to the church are ambiguous and may draw in divine or diabolical forces. Paying tithes bestows blessings, but failing to pay is dangerous because it is a refusal to incorporate with God that then invites in the devil, who brings sickness and poverty. Samuel explains:

It is God who gives you the money, so if you decide not to give intentionally, God will not physically take the money

away from you, but he will take back the money in another form. The person could fall sick and will have to use all the money to buy medication to cure it. . . . Someone could be working but may find himself in debt; the person may not [have] any tangible money he makes even though he knows he works hard; the person may even be in debt. When you give your tithe, it stops the devourer [devil] so he can’t even meddle in the affairs of your work to destroy it.

Samuel readily donates to avoid being easy prey for the devil. Nana Ama believes that tithes are the key to her job success and reports, “even if I’m unable to go to church, I give my tithe to someone else to pay for me. . . . As for tithe, I don’t joke with it.”

The indeterminacy of monetary donations is best exemplified by what Praise members refer to as the “foolish pledge,” which is when members promise to make donations to God but fail to do so. It is common for members to be pressured publicly in Praise to make financial pledges they cannot meet. Addo recounts his own experience:

It is pastor who forced me to also stand in front of the congregation and pledge. When he said that, I told him I wouldn’t do it, but he said it is a must for every leader in church to do that. I still didn’t get up, so he called my name in front of everyone and I had to go and stand in front of the congregation and pledge. . . . I didn’t pledge willingly, so paying it has been a bit difficult. I still haven’t paid that money.

Members believe that a foolish pledge leads to hardships; Addo is certain his recent financial troubles are due to his foolish pledge. Prosper proffers this theory: “The moment you make a foolish pledge, the devil puts his fingernails on everything of yours, people don’t pay you when they buy your items (on credit), and none of your businesses will flourish for you.” Prosper explains that when the devil makes it impossible for one to pay God, the foolish pledger continues to incur God’s wrath rather than his benevolence. These examples reveal the indeterminacy of trading with God, so religious donations must be done with the utmost commitment and intent. However, these instances also reveal that incorporating the divine is an ongoing exchange in which tithing constantly is necessary to draw God’s blessings into the unfinished dividual and provide protection from the devil, who devours material success.

Some researchers consider these donations merely payments for church services that enrich entrepreneurial pastors (Bonsu and Belk 2010), but the rise and spread of Pentecostalism cannot be fully explained by the thesis that the poor are duped. Our informants view the church marketplace as a buffer against the indeterminacy of the secular marketplace. Donations are part of ongoing practices of drawing God closer and pushing away danger in both secular and divine exchanges. Moreover, the small local churches provide an important financial safety net. We

believe Pentecostalism is popular because the converted are promised union with the divine throughout their lives. In a world of spiritual warfare, Pentecostal services offer moments of ecstatic union that are perpetually relevant as the convert separates from evil composites and incorporates the divine across subjects, times, products, and places.

## DISCUSSION

In this research, we draw on the concepts of permanent liminality and in/dividual personhood from sociology and anthropology to examine difficult consumer transitions that endure. We show how a continuous and contiguous separation and incorporation, from an undesired in/dividual in the dangerous world to a desired in/dividual in the safe world, creates an endless transition—a permanent liminality (see [figure 2](#)). [Szakolczai's \(2000\)](#) macrolevel theorization of permanent liminality suggests that liminality becomes permanent when separation, liminality, or incorporation stalls. By contrast, our research finds that liminality becomes permanent for the consumer when incorporation and separation continuously repeat. Furthermore, we move beyond circumstances in which permanent liminality results from a repeated, sequential movement from one state to another ([Nakata et al. 2019](#)) and explore permanent liminality due to a contiguous and ongoing struggle between separation and incorporation. We pay particular attention to the practices of separation and incorporation—across subjects, times, products, and places—that are critical to the transitional process. Rather than the raconteur self, who is often theorized as managing consumer transitions ([Schouten 1991](#); [Scott et al. 2017](#)), we find that it is the unfinished dividual, a composite of safe and dangerous elements, who drives this ongoing cycle of simultaneous separation and incorporation.

Some research has stressed the dividual nature of Africans in general and Ghanaians in particular ([Coleman 2011](#); [Daswani 2011](#); [Pype 2011](#)), but as we argued previously, all people are mixtures of individuality and dividuality depending on context. Prior anthropological research on Christianity in Africa ([Bialecki and Daswani 2015](#); [Pype 2011](#)) has examined how converts negotiate personhood ([Mosko 2010](#); [Vilaça 2011](#)). This research, however, does not explain when or how either a dividual or individual personhood becomes more salient during transitions. We find that the unfinished dividual is more salient during the liminal phase of Pentecostals' difficult transition. Our findings also support interpretations that Ghanaian Pentecostals' lived experiences of transitions reside between twin poles of the in/dividual continuum ([Bialecki and Daswani 2015](#); [LiPuma 1998](#); [Vilaça 2011](#)), on which permanent liminality is experienced as an unfinished

dividual caught between a desired and an undesired in/dividuality.

In addition, research on Pentecostal Christianity does not investigate how this negotiation of personhood sustains members' consumption of church services and goods or deepens their commitment. Our research explains this phenomenon as the result of the continuous push and pull between opposing divine and diabolical forces that prevents the dividual from ever fully transitioning. Separation from the dangerous world is never complete because of the continuous tug of diabolical forces; incorporation into the divine world is never complete because of the relentless potential for relapse into sinful ways. Thus, church attendance, donations, and religious purchases are perpetually relevant, enabling the church to keep a tenuous upper hand in this ongoing spiritual war.

Next, we explore the implications of our findings for consumer research on liminality and interrogate the implications of liminality's dark side for other difficult consumer transitions. We discuss the implications of our model for research on liquid modernity with concluding thoughts on how consumers can negotiate permanent liminality.

## Liminality and Difficult Consumer Transitions

Consumer researchers liberally apply the concept of liminality to describe various consumption contexts, such as Gay Pride festivities ([Kates 2002](#)), flea markets ([Belk et al. 1989](#)), Weight Watchers events ([Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010](#)), and ad breaks during TV shows ([Jayasinghe and Ritson 2013](#)). [Thomassen \(2014, 85\)](#), however, insists that “if it is not about transition, it simply is not about liminality.” Our research situates liminality squarely within difficult consumer transitions. We argue that the concept's explanatory power lies in understanding the success or failure of the transition. Specifically, our informants' endless transition empirically supports the paradox of permanent liminality that we explain using the in/dividual concept of personhood.

Our research also invites consumer researchers to interrogate the dark sides of liminality within transitions ([Scott et al. 2017](#); [Tumbat and Belk 2011](#)). A deeper assessment of the role of liminality within transitions reveals that “liminality is not something simply to be celebrated or wished for. Quite the contrary: liminality needs to be duly and carefully problematized” ([Thomassen 2014, 8](#)). Despite liminality's celebrated potentiality for change, championed by [Turner \(1969\)](#) and often noted in consumer research, liminality's disorder also has the potentiality for chaos and pain ([Douglas 1966](#)). In our context, our informants live with the danger of severing ties with their family and other social connections, while not yet fully integrating into the church family. They live in the betwixt and between, where they are often adrift and lack the anchor of a

stable identity. Protracted liminality can invite tricksters, such as entrepreneurs who pose as God's representatives, to establish churches and prosper from the donations of Pentecostal converts (Haynes 2012; Szokolczai 2017b).

In this regard, our model of permanent liminality can be used to interrogate other difficult consumer transitions that can occur in overconsumption, compulsive consumption, and substance addiction (Hirschman 1992; Hoch and Loewenstein 1991; O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Obesity is a major health issue in developed countries, and the dieting industry is huge, touting medicines, programs, and quick solutions to help consumers lose weight. For example, Moisio and Beruchashvili (2010) explored the use of Weight Watchers support groups among women who wanted to lose weight. While dieters often lose weight in the first nine to 12 months of dieting, they gain almost all of it back in the next two to five years, maintaining only an average weight loss of 2.1 pounds (Tomiya, Ahlstrom, and Mann 2013). Research suggests that frequent dieting predicts future weight gain (Pietiläinen et al. 2012). Thus, given the high likelihood that dieters will regain weight, many consumers are caught in a perpetual cycle of losing and regaining weight—a permanent liminality in which the transition to a person with a healthy, stable weight is never completed.

Our model allows us to ask, When is the consumer most permeable to the influences of temptation and craving, and when is he or she most permeable to the benefits of the support group? What would allow the person to fully separate from the world of harmful practices and fully incorporate a world of beneficial behaviors? Is long-term sequestering necessary for successful transformation, and if so, what factors allow for successful reentry? These are important questions for future research.

Our model also raises the issue of whether we should accept that some transitions will be inevitably ongoing, enduring processes rather than a temporary process that allows one to permanently shift to a new, desired person. For example, substance addiction is now viewed as a chronic disease in which cycles of relapse and remission occur (American Society of Addiction Medicine 2011). Similarly, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous espouse the view that addiction is a lifelong struggle, allowing participants to have realistic expectations that they will never transition to someone who is no longer addicted. Still, a few hours of late-evening TV watching evince that marketers make many attempts to convince consumers that a transition to a desired end state will be short in duration and stable after the transition is made. Great profits are earned by companies that keep consumers in a perpetual cycle of purchasing products and services that are unable to deliver lasting change. In our context, Pentecostal pastors and churches thrive on and profit from consumers' permanent liminality, which requires the constant need for church services and

"blessed" products. Our model explains why consumers stay in such permanent liminalities, as they are entangled in never-ending cycles of separation and incorporation as unfinished individuals.

## Liquid Modernity in Permanent Liminality

Our model and findings shed light on the struggles and challenges of modernity, conceptualized in sociology as a period in which traditional sources of security, such as community and social institutions, undergo rapid transformation (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bauman 2000). Although modernity can lead to advances that benefit humanity, this transformation is one of instability and danger. Szokolczai (2014) analyzed the transition to modernity in Ireland and notes that with the onset of modernization came a drastic rise in suicide rates, an indicator of the anomie caused by the loss of traditional social structures.

While modernity starts as a period of transition—promising the end state of a meaningful life—the process is "unfinished and unfinishable," an "infinitely spiraling process of change," and thus a permanent liminality (Szokolczai 2014, 32–33). Szokolczai (2000) views permanent liminality as the result of a freezing at the separation, liminal, or incorporation stage, experienced as "time [standing] still." Our model and findings suggest that rather than a freezing in the transition between traditional and modern ways, people actually experience a contiguous and continuous process. The contested individual is pushed and pulled by both traditional and modern forces. Separation fails when traditional forces continue to draw the person back to the "old ways" and incorporation is impossible because the shift to modernity has no true end point, for there is always a "new modern," and the far side of the transition is ethereal and unending. In our model, we introduce the concept of the zone of indeterminacy to capture these spaces of radical uncertainty. Although our explanation differs from Szokolczai's (2000) explanation of permanent liminality, we agree that the rise of zones of indeterminacy is making permanent liminality ever more common, such as the increase of millions of displaced refugees and immigrants who will only grow in number along with global warming, armed conflict, and struggles over finite resources.

We observe this struggle very clearly when people move from one society to another: the stabilizing structures in one's society of origin are left behind, yet incorporation into a new society is often problematic. This situation is the lived experience of millions. In recent years, an unprecedented number of people have been forced to move from their homes. At present count, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2019) documents that 70.8 million people are in this predicament. Only a very small percentage of the world's refugees are able to resettle as permanent residents, and thus they remain in protracted



exile (Esses, Hamilton, and Gaucher 2017), some for decades and with no end in sight (Devictor and Do 2016). Those who do manage to live in a new country often do so without rights to stay permanently, and they may not fully integrate to the host culture, always anticipating that they may have to uproot again. Those who are able to stay permanently can still face hostility from locals that make integration impossible. Thus, the transition from a prerefugee status to a postrefugee status can be thwarted in many ways because incorporation into the new culture is not achieved, and therefore many refugees remain in permanent liminality.

Immigrants, those who have chosen to move from their homes, may also find themselves struggling to transition to their new environment. Üstüner and Holt's (2007) study of Turkish mothers and daughters who migrated from rural villages to urban slums found that the mothers worked at creating a "village in the city," carefully selecting only a few modern products for their homes while continuing with traditional practices. By contrast, the daughters strove to cast off the traditions of their mothers and village and embraced the consumption practices of the city, building new identities by taking on the consumption norms of young city women. From Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) conceptualization of liquid consumption, we consider a liminal situation in which identities become fluid from the loss of institutions and traditions; in transitioning to a new in/dividuality, the consumer turns to the marketplace and brands symbolic of the person they want to become (McAlexander et al. 2014).

This process is not always successful, though. A five-year follow-up by Üstüner and Holt (2007) revealed that the Turkish daughters were frustrated in their attempt to transition to city women. Confronting discrimination and class barriers, they all still lived in the slums, and most had given up on their identity project of transitioning to the life of modern city women. Üstüner and Holt did not analyze their results from a permanent liminality lens, but from our perspective, we view these young women as contested individuals. Living with their mothers, they experienced the daily pull of village tradition, a pull they perpetually resisted and despised, but they were unable to escape through the incorporation into city women and thus remained permanently trapped in liminality. Their mothers, however, fared much better, avoiding steps toward transition and the slide into permanent liminality by clinging tightly to their village traditions and identity.

Our analysis has implications for aid organizations that support refugees and migrants. Material goods can play an important role in developing and reflecting personhood (Belk 1988; Üstüner and Holt 2007). In research on Thai adolescent tsunami survivors who had lost all their possessions, Klein and Huang (2007) found that they yearned for possessions that they had cherished before the tsunami and clothing that fit with their predisaster personhoods.

Consistent with their cultural orientation, the survivors acted in this context more as individuals, requesting products that would assist their families. We suggest that when providing aid to those in need, organizations must understand what aspect of their in/dividual personhood is more salient. Furthermore, as Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) note, little is known about whether liquid consumption—ephemeral, access-based, and typical of the modern, digitized world—can provide the security of solid consumption practices, which are enduring, ownership-based, and material. Our analysis suggests that a productive approach to this issue in future research is to explore whether liquid or solid consumption can help consumers in transition as they attempt to avoid or navigate the inherent distresses of permanent liminality.

Transitions in modernity will only become more complex and challenging. The world is rapidly entering a time in which the ramifications of climate change will drastically affect how we live. We may never be able to return to our current state, and the future will be ever evolving. We may all be plunging into an unending transition, a permanent liminality in which we struggle to hold on to the luxuries of our past but never gain a foothold on the territory of an unstable, unpredictable, and continuously changing environment. Given the role of consumption in producing climate change and the central role of consumption in negotiating personhood during times of upheaval, the practices of consumption in the permanent liminality caused by climate change are a critical future research agenda.

## CONCLUSION

Can consumers escape permanent liminality? We conjecture that as permanent liminality becomes a common feature of liquid modernity and consumption, new structures will emerge to justify and support it. Our context offers a good illustration of how permanent liminality can become institutionalized. Permanent liminality is precarious, but the church constructs a worldview of indeterminacy that makes informants accept that their transitions will never end and supplies members with a survival guide to navigate it. The spiritual warfare preceded and will outlast our informants, but the church provides them with practices of separation and incorporation to soldier on, one battle at a time, in vigilance against the dangers of the world and in hope for a safe world whenever their transition ends. Permanent liminality may thus emerge as a transitional endpoint, and consumers and institutions will develop coping strategies to navigate it, much like the immune system adapts to a virus (Bauman 2000; Szokolczai 2014). Future research might explore this and other coping strategies for consumers caught in permanent liminality.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author conducted all of the in-person fieldwork himself from December 2013 until January 2017 in Ghana. The second and third authors acted as confidantes throughout the process. Data were discussed and analyzed on multiple occasions by all authors using the first author's interview transcripts, field notes, photographs, video, and artifacts. The final ethnography was jointly authored.

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