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# Religion and Politics in Africa

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All religion is based on a belief in the existence of invisible forces which influence human destiny. So important is belief of this sort in contemporary African thought, we will argue in this essay, that many Africans appear to believe that the widely-attested malaise of their public life may be explained largely, or even primarily, by reference to these invisible forces.

Among the evidence for this assertion is the rapid growth of movements of religious renewal or revival which are to be found in all parts of Africa today, especially those which are sometimes described as 'fundamentalist', and of new religious movements in general (Tozy 1995:58-74; Gifford 1994:513-34; Mbembe 1988). Some of the ideas articulated by and within these movements may be construed as a critique of the way in which power is organized. Drawing on a rich religious imagery, many popular texts circulating in Africa today constitute a commentary on a world in which power is represented as being too often an instrument that evil people use to destroy peace and harmony. To put it in more familiar and more prosaic terms, these texts are an oblique criticism of misgovernment. And, like any group of people who come together in search of power, Africa's new religious movements are, themselves a field of action in which that elusive commodity, power, may be acquired and redistributed.

In the following pages we will discuss what power is and how it is represented from various points of view before examining the political implications of the growth of new religious movements in Africa.

## Power and Its Organization

Power is usually defined as the ability of a person to induce others to act in the way which he or she requires (Bullock and Stallybrass

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1977:490). In human affairs, power is a social attribute derived from the way in which individuals combine with one another and endeavour, singly and collectively, to endure (Canetti 1987). It is illuminating to compare this social definition of power with the use of the term in the physical sciences where it designates an energy or force which may be applied to work. This comparison provides a telling metaphor concerning the intangibility of power: the physical power of electricity, for example, is invisible but its presence may be detected by its effects, which can be used by those who control it for various purposes. Just as electricity is neither good nor bad, it can be used either for social purposes, such as to provide light, or for destructive purposes, such as in the form of execution in the electric chair, so too is the human ability to induce others to conform to an individual will essentially amoral. Power can be used by those who have it for purposes which may ultimately be judged either benign or malign.

The analysis of power in human society thus poses a number of questions concerning the nature and intent of people who hold power, the means by which they exercise it, and the criteria by which its actual use is to be assessed as either good or bad. Religion and politics are both systems of ordering social power, in the process of which elements of authority and hierarchy tend to emerge. As such, religion and politics are closely related. In the modern Western tradition which arose from the European Enlightenment these two systems of harnessing or manipulating power have been subject to sharp organizational and intellectual distinctions which conform to the separation of politics and religion or church and state. However it is clear that a large number of the world's people continue to regard these two spheres of power as impinging upon one another or even, in some circumstances, of being virtually indistinct from one another. This is true not only of Africa (Bayart, Mbembe and Toulabor 1993), but also, for example, of China (Jenner 1992:198-200). Thus, while the present essay concentrates on Africa, observations may be situated in a broader debate on the way in which many peoples in the developing world are reordering the systems by which power is acquired and distributed in their societies in the aftermath of a century and more of subjection to institutions originally imposed on them by Europeans or otherwise acquired as a result of Western influence (Bayart 1996).

Even in Europe, despite the decline in religious belief in recent decades, opinion polls consistently show that the majority of people declare themselves to believe in God or profess some other sort of religious belief. Active religious activity and regular church attendance are more widespread in the US (Wright 1995). However, in Europe and in many other parts of the industrialized world, religious practice, in common with many other forms of behaviour and belief, has become intensely individual. In Europe and North America, it is generally regarded as a matter of individual conscience whether or not a person chooses to believe in God and, if so, whether or not they choose to attend church or perform public rituals of worship, although the importance of Christian Democrat parties in Western Europe shows a vestige of belief in the public importance of religion. Modern Western states are to a greater or lesser extent secular in the sense that it is a matter of official indifference whether citizens are believers or not, and if so in which particular creed they place their faith. Like so much else in the advanced capitalist world, religion is a matter of consumer choice.

Whether in the West, in Africa, or elsewhere, the essential component of religious action is the belief that communication is possible between people and God or His agents, the ancestors or other invisible spiritual forces, most obviously through prayer, but also through dreams, visions and miracles, for example, although the latter have tended to fall into disuse in the West. In most religious traditions, there are also other techniques which the living can use to influence or communicate with the invisible forces which they believe to have a bearing on their lives, such as through the performance of rituals, sacrifices and pilgrimages or through the use of instruments such as candles, incense, prayer-wheels, protective objects and so forth. When significant numbers of people believe in the efficacy of certain techniques or rituals, it is possible then to consider these techniques and/or rituals as components of a specific religious system.

In general, the collective performance of such actions is deemed to enhance their effectiveness. Collective performance of rituals or recital of prayers also has the effect of emphasizing the communality of the participants and the ties of belief binding them together. Some authors in fact hold that religion may be defined principally as an element which binds the community of believers. In any system of

this sort, where aim is to harness the power of the invisible for human purposes, religious experts or authorities may emerge who are regarded as having a special role in mediating between the visible and the invisible worlds. In this respect, religious systems differ very greatly. In Roman Catholic dogma, for example, the revelation of divine will is regarded as having occurred two millennia ago and only occasionally since then. The guardians and interpreters of this revelation in the Catholic church are a hierarchy of priests. For most regular church-attenders, at least until rather recently, direct communication by believers with the divine will has tended to be replaced by the mediation of organized hierarchies which control such access, although the recent growth of charismatic religions in the US and worldwide may be seen as an attempt by ordinary believers to establish direct contact, making use of visions, possessions and miracles which can occur without the mediation of a priest or similar ritual specialist. In this sense, the growth of charismatic movements is a matter of concern to all established religious hierarchies since it has the potential to subvert their own control of revelations. At the same time, throughout the Western world, the growth of secularism has meant that an increasing number of people engage in no organized form of worship or communication with the spiritual world at all.

In Africa, there is a long tradition in most indigenous religions for revelation of the divine will or access to the spirit world in general to be directly available to the mass of believers in the form of dreams, visions, spirit possession and so on. Only in the last century or so has a more rigid hierarchical control been imposed by missionary churches led by Westerners who have attempted to monopolize the interpretation of the divine will. The growth of churches instituted and controlled by Africans represents, among other things, a shift in this pattern since one of the common characteristics of African-instituted churches is the perceived ability of the community of believers to have direct access to the spirit world, particularly in the form of spirit possession. There is thus a constant dialectic between priests, appointed by a hierarchy as authentic interpreters of revelation, and prophets, whose authority lies only in their own conviction of the authenticity of their revelation and the degree to which this conviction is shared by others. The key resource in this spiritual politics is access to the spirit world and the power which this implies.



If the evangelization of Africa represented an attempt by Europeans to reorder both the content and the administration of power in the spiritual realm, it was also part of a much greater attempt to reorganize the protocols of power in Africa, most obviously in the form of colonial rule. When European states established colonies in Africa in the late nineteenth century, they created institutions for government in conformity with the norms in vogue in Europe at the time. Briefly, colonial administrators supposed that government should be through modern, bureaucratic organs of state, and that the proper function of a state is to uphold a rational system of law and to design and implement rational policies which, generally speaking, depend on material inputs of resources for the satisfaction of specific aims deemed to be for the common good. The identification of this common good is made, in the last resort, by political authorities. In colonial times, these were situated in European metropoles but, these days, they are located in Africa's capital cities. Religion, in this European-originated tradition, is hardly an affair of state but of non-state authorities of whom Christian missionaries were, generally but by no means always, those most favourably viewed by colonial political authorities. It was in this sense that colonization and evangelization represented two aspects of the projection of European power in Africa.

Modern African states, with few exceptions,[1] owe their formal institutional foundations to European notions of secularism and of the separation of state and church or of the temporal and spiritual realms. Properly religious institutions such as churches, on the other hand, are channels of religious expression but are only, with difficulty, admitted to the political field when the latter is defined in the formal sense derived from constitutions based on Western models. In current Western theory, the proper means for conducting political activity in modern states is within institutions such as political parties established to channel the conflicts of opinion and interest which arise in any society and which ultimately shape the decisions taken by governments, or through public organs such as the press in which opinion may be aired.

Before their continent was colonized, Africans had other institutions by which they organized the administration of the power inherent in both politics and religion. Generally, these did not stem from any philosophical supposition that visible and invisible spheres

of power were separate. It was a common feature of African cultures in the past for people to believe that all human affairs, whether individual success or failure in matters such as work, marriage, health and business, or public concerns such as peace and political stability, were affected by invisible power (Ranger and Kimambo 1972). Evidence will shortly be shown that many Africans today continue to believe that invisible powers have a bearing on their lives and that religion is commonly a matter of community concern and of public importance as well as of individual choice, and that this has a bearing on politics even in countries with formal institutions which, being of Western origin, supposes the separation of secular and religious spheres. Before doing so, some of the prevailing paradigms in the academic literature will be examined first before going on to consider the substance of this argument, namely that new religious idioms in Africa are partly a response to the social, economic and political problems prevalent in much of the continent which have been extensively described by social scientists.

## The Study of Religion and Politics in Africa

The fact that religion and politics are treated as separate in the public institutions which the West bequeathed to Africa reflects a deeper tradition in Western thought. The principal academic disciplines taught in Western universities today are also a product of this same tradition, and their categories of knowledge and analysis do not easily offer tools for analyzing the ways in which religion affects public life in Africa. The literature on politics and governance in Africa, for example, often fails to give serious attention to the role played by religion, and yet this seems essential for analyses seeking to paint an accurate picture of the way in which power is considered by Africans and of the processes by which it is used or abused by individuals and groups. At the same time, it is important for scholars seeking to address this subject to avoid becoming ensnared in modern forms of the old paradigms of Orientalism if they are to avoid representing new religious idioms as unfathomably exotic (Said 1978). It is generally agreed that many African states today are faced with profound problems. Broadly speaking, the relevant literature tends to analyze these problems in the conventional terms used by the academic disciplines of economics, political science and public administration.[2] Probably the most influential analyses of the malaise



of African states, which has been increasingly evident since the early 1980s, have been in the field of economics.

Most writers on African states, operating within the mainstream of Anglo-American paradigms, assume that religion is a cultural matter, less important than the analysis of economics and politics when it comes to investigating why Africa is governed (or misgoverned) the way it is. Attempts by political analysts to study the role of religion in African politics tend to adopt an institutional analysis which fails to address the manner in which religious ideologies have a bearing on the way in which political power is actually perceived and exercised (Kukah, Gofford and Haynes 1993). The work of historians in reconstituting the relationship between religion and politics in the past (Ranger and Kimambo 1991; Raison-Jourde 1991) has made relatively little impact on the literature on contemporary politics and public affairs. It should be noted, however, that a francophone school of political science, strongly influenced by a wider literature of philosophy, history and anthropology, has succeeded far better in incorporating religion in its analysis frame-work (Bayart 1989; Bayart, Mbembe and Toulabor 1993). In recent decades, the influence of writers trained in the disciplines of theology, missionary studies, church studies and the like (Hastings 1994) has diminished in proportion as theology has lost the central place it once had in Western academic curricula. This has left the specialized study of religion in Africa largely in the hands of academic writers in the discipline of anthropology.

However, anthropology generally displays certain deficiencies in its analysis of religion. Most anthropological studies of religion in Africa are determinedly secular in as much as they examine Africans' religious practices while implicitly supposing that the latter are fallacious as representations of reality. Religion tends to be represented as a metaphor expressing other fundamental causes of change in human societies. Anthropologists describe rituals and systems of belief rather more adequately than they consider the philosophies or theologies which produce them. Such an approach fails to consider the nature of religion as an actual belief, as an expression of how things really are. A methodological antidote to this is to consider Africans' statements on religious matters in the first instance in their own terms, that is to say in theological terms, before attempting to translate these into a vocabulary more appropriate to

other branches of learning. To borrow the vocabulary of linguistics, it is useful to describe religions in 'emic' terms, that is those derived from the believers' own point of view, before doing so in 'etic', or external terms which correspond more closely to a Western scientific view of objectivity. This does not imply that an analyst must share the religious beliefs of the people he or she studies, but merely that the observer must initially suspend judgement by allowing Africans the right to express matters in the terms they think appropriate.

In the following section, some aspects of religious belief will be outlined briefly as it is expressed by Africans before considering what other interpretations may be placed on them.

**Religion in Africa**

Perhaps the most important characteristic of religion in Africa is the widespread belief in the existence of an invisible world populated by spirits of various sorts. These spirits are often perceived not as metaphorical constructs but as actual beings which, though invisible, are real, powerful and effective. Spirits are often considered more powerful than human beings. The spirits of dead ancestors, being the surviving remnants of people who have already passed through life, and being closer to God than are the living, are deemed to be wiser than human beings. Their influence is deemed to be inextricably linked to the welfare of their progeny, their own descendants in a lineage or kinship group.[3] Ancestral spirits, nature spirits and other invisible forces are believed to have the power to make crops grow and rain fall, and are of cosmic importance.

As a Cameroonian Roman Catholic priest put it (Mbuy 1994:3),

> The African sees the Cosmos as a given reality created by God the Moulder and given to us. So we are merely custodians. Man is the summit of all creation. He is both Physical and Spiritual, therefore a perfect centre of interaction between the spiritual and physical worlds. The Human Being has power which he can use for good or bad. He may die but death is not seen as an annihilation. Hence the talk about people appearing after death. In fact it is believed that people are more powerful after death. Hence the close association to the Ancestors.

These and similar beliefs in the efficacy of the invisible world are widespread today even in countries which have undergone intensive European influence, such as Zimbabwe (Lan 1985; Wilson 1992) and South Africa (Kessel n.d.). This is merely the latest stage of



evolution in a deep historical tradition. We would add at once that tradition is neither constant nor unavoidable. It is an idiom, a range of options offered to people with a historical memory, 'a cultural continuity transmitted in the form of social attitudes, beliefs, principles and conventions of behaviour etc., deriving from past experience and helping to shape the present'[4]. In many societies of pre-colonial Africa, rulers were endowed with sacred duties such as, causing rain to fall and crops to grow and of upholding the cosmic order generally in systems which have been called 'sacred kingship'. In such societies, any major disorder in the invisible sphere was held to have a probable or even an inevitable effect on the physical fortunes of the community of believers. By the same token, any major event, such as a war, a famine or an untimely death, was believed to have its ultimate cause in the invisible world. A priest-king in this type of society might be served and advised by both religious functionaries and more secular ones such as tax-collectors or army captains, but the distinction is not altogether a valid one since even eminently physical activities as making war were held to be affected by the outcome of events in the invisible world, so that an army would certainly need appropriate spiritual armament if it were to achieve success in battle, just as farmers needed religious ceremonies to help their crops grow. Even in the so-called 'stateless societies' of old Africa, where village chiefs or councils of elders were responsible for the routine administration of government, real public authority actually lay with ritual experts who mediated between the visible and the invisible worlds, while chiefs or civic rulers were mere instruments of decisions which had been reached elsewhere (Little 1965).[5]

In keeping with the observation that religious views which are deeply rooted in Africa have been subjected to a certain degree of historical continuity and have evolved in the face of such innovations as the construction of nation-states with institutions of government derived from European models, there is widespread evidence that many Africans continue to hold beliefs derived from older cosmologies which they apply to their everyday activities even when they live in cities and earn their living from jobs in the civil service or in the modern economic sector. Moreover, contrary to what an older generation of Western scholars were prone to believe, such views have not disappeared with education. Religious belief is general at

every level of society in Africa. Popular priests and prophets work in areas where the poor live, while the rich may have their own more exclusive spiritual advisors. Many religious leaders minister to both rich and poor. Plural religious allegiance is common at all levels of society, so that an individual may be a member of several religious congregations simultaneously, or even practice religious rituals regarded in the West as belonging to different systems of belief, such as Christianity and Islam, or Christianity and traditional religion. There is evidence that, as in the past, many Africans believe that the religious activities of political elites have some bearing on the destiny of national affairs and that elites may make use of religious communities for purposes of political communication. In Cameroon, relations between political elites and their constituents are mediated, among other ways, through the medium of religious action and affiliation (Geschiere 1995). Zambia is one of several countries in which popular religious leaders have sometimes developed such large followings that political leaders have at times interpreted it as a threat to their own authority (Geschiere 1995). In Senegal, the influence wielded by marabouts or Islamic holy men belonging to the main Islamic brotherhoods has been recognized as a source of political influence for decades (Cruise 1975). During the *chimurenga* war in Zimbabwe, the advice of mediums said to be possessed by the spirits of deceased ancestors played a vital role in forming the opinion of the population on the war (Lan 1985).

Political elites do not only use religion as a means of enhancing their influence over their less exalted compatriots but also believe access to the spiritual world to be a vital resource in the constant struggle to gain victory over their rivals in political in-fighting, through the use of sacrifices, protective objects, auguries and so on. President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, widely considered one of the most successful and enlightened African heads of state used such methods throughout his career and even before. In his last years, he devoted enormous resources to the construction of the great basilica which was designed to perpetuate his memory and his power over generations yet unborn. Many other heads of state are known to employ religious experts in their personal entourage to whom they may turn to advice on matters far removed from what, in modern Western thought, would be considered religious affairs. Kenneth Kaunda, for example, when he was president of Zambia, retained the



services of an Indian guru, Dr Ranganathan, whom he consulted on a wide range of issues and whom he recommended to friends and others within his immediate circle (ter Haar 1992). A more controversial choice was that of President Mathieu Kérékou of Benin, who retained the services of Mohamed Amadou Cissé, known as 'Djine', or 'the Devil', a Malian marabout who was known to have held a ceremony in which he publicly espoused the devil,[6] the source of evil, and had previously worked for other heads of state including Presidents Mobutu Seseko of Zaïre and Omar Bongo of Gabon. Amadou Cissé was appointed a Minister of State in the Beninois government, responsible for the secret services. He was eventually convicted of fraud in a major trial (Chabi n.d.). Other heads of state have founded esoteric cults which played an important role in elite rituals for their inner circle, such as President Didier Ratsiraka of Madagascar, whose palace included an extravagant temple dedicated to Rosicrucianism,[7] President Paul Biya of Cameroon, also a Rosicrucian (Bayart 1995:287-99), and President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique who is a follower of transcendental meditation.

All these heads of state appear to believe that their grasp of power may be enhanced by religious practice, and that the weight of the affairs of state which they have in their hands requires them not merely to attend public worship, like other believers, but to have access to esoteric forms of advice from which the mass of the population is excluded. All elites tend to cultivate their own exclusive institutions, in Africa and elsewhere, in which they may socialise with their peers. African heads of state, believing in the power of the invisible world like their subjects, seek higher forms of power commensurate with the importance of the positions they seek to defend and of the duties which they have to discharge. Moreover, it is common to tenure of great power in all cultures that it imposes on its holders moral choices weightier than those facing most of the subjects, and this takes power-holders into an exclusive moral realm.

The religious practices of the mighty are known to the mass of the population. In the days before press freedom became general in Africa in the 1990s, activities of this sort were favourite subjects of discourse in popular debates through *radio trottoir*, which understood well the role played by religion in elite struggles, just as many people used similar techniques to solve their daily problems by consulting healers, priests, diviners and marabouts, by seeking the views of the

ancestors conveyed through spirit mediums, or attending services conducted by priests and prophets of every variety, thus the people, draw their own conclusions concerning what they hear. In Zaïre for example, the national government is sometimes considered to be composed of a conspiracy elite of witches, who consult marabouts of sinister reputation at night in an effort to enhance their power (Diamani 1995:151-7).

Marabouts and other spiritual experts who have politicians among their clientele become repositories of highly confidential information, like a priest confessor in the Catholic church, since politicians who have recourse to them will divulge their innermost ambitions in a bid to attain the power they crave. Hence a leading marabout, like Amadou Cissé in Benin or Bonkano in Niger, acquires inside information of planned coups and other secrets of his elite clients. In this sense, a spiritual expert who is frequented by members of the elite bears a close resemblance to the head of an intelligence service, and rulers who takes this person into their service is acquiring a valuable source of worldly information as well as invisible power. Rulers who refuses to frequent such people deprives themselves of a vital source of information as much as of a perceived medium of supernatural power.

**Religious Clientelism**

If the spiritual experts who frequent the palaces of the elite acquire worldly power through their activities, so in a different way do these religious leaders who acquire mass followings.

The influence wielded by a popular religious leader in Africa is different in many respects from that exercised by any other leader of civil society, such as the leader of a professional association or a trade union. Whereas the latter may be able to articulate demands for higher wages or more jobs which government can deal with through the conventional techniques of modern government and politics, a religious leader is endowed with power perceived as stemming from an invisible world which is foreign to the norms of government based on the classical Western separation of religion and politics into distinct systems of thought and action. The leader of a secular organization may be placated with the gifts of patronage or intimidated with the threat of exclusion or the application of coercion,



but a president finds it more difficult to identify techniques for dealing with, for example, a massive possession by evil spirits.

Temporal rulers attempting to govern populations who believe that their daily life is affected by the invisible powers of religion lack institutional means of control in this sphere. When the Zambian Catholic Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo carried out his healing ministry by exorcising evil spirits and calling upon the Holy Spirit to fill his parishioners, he was mediating invisible powers believed by Zambians to exist but over which the recognized political authorities of the country had no control. In the end, this caused such political disquiet as to cause President Kaunda to acquiesce to Archbishop Milingo's removal by the Vatican (ter Haar 1992). Even in the heyday of one-party states, when heads of state controlled virtually every secular organ of associational life, the spirit world was always more elusive. Some rulers, like Presidents Mobutu of Zaïre (Roberts A. F. 1988) or Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo (Toulabor 1986), established quasi-religious cults of their own in what it is permissible to interpret as an attempt to revive systems of sacred kingship, but always with limited or short-lived success. For while secular institutions of government and politics may be managed with appropriate doses of patronage and coercion, the spiritual world is less easy to govern in a continent where prophecy and spirit possession are widespread and where access to spiritual power (as opposed to political power) is within the reach of all. Anyone may communicate with the invisible world of the spirits and receive messages from that source. People possessed by spirits, prophets with privileged access to the spirit world, or people who use potent instruments of religious communication to express their wishes and aspirations all have access to power in a form which may pay little respect to the social or political norms in vogue. This poses a constant threat to the ideological order and thus to political stability. Most troubling of all for governments are spiritual leaders who develop a mass following whom they succeed in filling with the invisible powers at their command, such as in Christian belief, the Holy Spirit. People who believe themselves filled with such a spirit are literally empowered with a force against which secular rulers have little control. But by the same token such religious leaders may spurn secular power or, even if they covet it, find it difficult to acquire on the basis of a purely spiritual authority. This is one explanation for

why so many of the national conferences held in Africa in the early 1990s chose bishops as their presidents, people who could appeal to sources of power unavailable to discredited politicians but unlikely to turn their office into the base for a presidential campaign (M'Nteba, pp. 361-72).

## The Moral Value of Power

Many writers throughout history have expressed the conviction that the possession of great power tempts its holders to immorality or at the very least confronts them with dilemmas which require them to make profound choices concerning good and evil, normally the prerogative of gods. Or, as Nietzsche noted, 'every high degree of power always involves a corresponding degree of freedom from good and evil'.

### *Political Leaders*

Politicians, being powerful, have the capacity to make moral choices of great consequence, and the less they are trammeled by constitutions or some other apparatus of restraint, the more dangerous this can be. However, there is evidence from different parts of Africa that the relative latitude enjoyed by the powerful in this respect is merely a reflection of a much wider confusion concerning public morality and the social organizations which are regarded as having the legitimate authority to regulate it. In these circumstances, both political and religious power can be a source of constant uncertainty and sometimes of disquiet for small groups of believers, in a village or in a family, but also in a larger community, even within a nation.

In modern Africa even more than in other continents, this is true of the political realm as well as of the spiritual realm due to the lack of entrenched constitutions or protocols of power in both the political and the spiritual fields. In politics, for example, an act such as the assumption of office by a new head of state, is clearly an enunciation of power, which normally speaking cannot be regarded as either good or bad until the incumbent makes their intentions known by their actions over the course of time. Rulers are judged by what they achieve, all the more so in the absence of constitutional checks and balances. To take a common enough example in Africa, a politician who arrives in power unconstitutionally through a *coup d'état* may



emerge as a generally benign ruler, but it is more likely that they will not remain so, since experience shows that the use of illegitimate violence in the formative act of controlling power may well lead to the commission of further acts of violence in its exercise. Similarly the purpose of a religious act, such as performing a ritual or uttering a prayer, may not be clear until its results become apparent in the absence of a generally acknowledged structure of religious authority. The reasons for this lie deep in Africa's history and in the reorganization of the language of power into various political and religious idioms. Religious experts may see signs of the intent in the known character of the person involved and the form of the ritual in question. So too in the field of religious ritual, where the enactment of a public ritual in conformity with an established and accepted practice is more likely to lead to a positive outcome for the community at large than a ritual which is in some way unusual or bears the hallmarks of evil intent. In popular imagery, the latter are often associated with small, exclusive and secret groups which perform their actions at night, one of the perceived characteristics of witches. Just as political and religious powers are comparable, so too are the actions of covens of witches and exclusive groups of plotters and putschists. Their exclusivity and selfishness are signs of their evil intentions.

Given the ambiguous nature of power in all its manifestations, and given also the ubiquity of religion in African societies, it is not surprising to learn that rulers whose use of power is not always for the common good also participate in cults which are perceived as being anti-social or even diabolical in nature, such as Rosicrucianism and the cultivation of satanic specialists noted above. Rosicrucianism is often represented in the Christian literature circulating in Africa as being a diabolical religion (Bradford, Williams, Pwol, Cheal and Dankwa 1980:54-9). While many Africans, most notably orthodox Christians and Muslims, perceive this as a sad state of affairs, they do not appear to be particularly surprised by it, since it is no secret that their societies are governed by self-serving elites. The significant point to not for present purposes, is that political power is expressed partly in terms of an appropriate religious ritual. Benign rulers employ benign rituals, and malign rulers do the opposite.

This begs the question of why any ruler should consciously choose to identify with a religious cult commonly perceived as being

malign. Whereas it is perhaps understandable that a head of state who is also a religious believer may seek spiritual guidance, it is notable in some of the cases cited here that presidents have consciously had recourse to individual experts, or to cults, widely believed to be fundamentally evil in origin. A ruler who has struggled and fought, literally, to achieve power, and who is conscious of the danger of violent overthrow, is even more likely than a constitutional ruler to require special powers to survive. It is tempting to have recourse to a source of instant earthly power which, in many African religious traditions, can be achieved by sacrifices, by the spilling of blood. In Christian theology, the granting of earthly power is one of the principal assets of the devil, the incarnation of evil. Archbishop Milingo, one of Africa's leading specialists in these matters and nowadays, the Vatican's leading exorcist, records that he has often been approached by politicians who have, literally, made diabolic pacts in order to secure the earthly wealth and power which Satan can bestow in return for possession of a supplicant's soul. In this way, the lack of constitutional and legal restraints of African rulers is mirrored by the lack of religious authorities strong enough to dispense or withhold spiritual power through the command of religious systems to which the mass of the population subscribes. Religious and political confusion go hand in hand.

**The Dysfunction of African States**

We have noted that the academic literature on Africa in recent years has been dominated by studies on the shortcomings of public life and public institutions, and that these analyses have generally been written in the idiom appropriate to such academic disciplines as economics or political science. Some authors have maintained that a fundamental problem facing modern African states is the form with which they were endowed by their colonial forebears (Davidson 1992), or their capture by urban elites who govern in their own interest, or their chronic incapacity to exercise good governance, or the scourges of neopatrimonialism and corruption, or some other cause whose ultimate origin is unclear. Particularly at the time of independence, individuals, some of them with low qualifications and little experience, were able to gain unimaginable wealth and power in a wonderfully short time. And, in the turbulence of African politics, some lost it as quickly.



There is reason to believe that many Africans, in pondering over these same questions regarding the vagaries of power, phrase the question and its response in a religious idiom in preference to, or in addition to, the idiom of conventional Western discourse. Many modern Cameroonians, reflecting on their recent history, have come to the conclusion that the country is faced with a serious problem caused by sorcerers, people who use religion to gain power for themselves at the expense of others, and that this is the explanation why so many political careers rise meteorically or are cut short suddenly (Geschiere 1995). It is perceived that witches are spreading evil throughout the country. In discussing this matter, we encounter a difficult semantic problem. While the vocabulary applied to religion in the modern English language is reasonably adequate for technical descriptions of prayer or ritual, it is inadequate for discussion of more subjective matters such as the positive or negative, or good or evil, purposes of religious action. Writers are obliged to have recourse to terms such as 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery' to describe ideas whose fluidity and nuances may be significantly different in African languages and African thought (Evans-Pritchard 1965). In the logic of this idiom this is hardly surprising, since colonial government made their little or no provision for the repression of witchcraft, refusing to consider it as a crime. Both during and after the colonial period, many countries have witnessed witch-hunting movements inspired by a widespread belief that witches are abroad and that, since the government offers no solution or may be itself infested with witches who have grown powerful and rich on their illegitimate assumption of power, ordinary people must improvise their own defence.

There are examples of this mode of popular reasoning recorded at widely dispersed occasions in space and time. In pre-colonial Madagascar, for example, a government which imposed Christianity as the official state religion in 1869 made no provision for fighting witchcraft. A subsequent series of catastrophes led some to believe that this transformation of religious legitimation had led to a profound subversion of the body politic and even of the cosmos. In time, this perception gave rise to a major effort to revive older religious traditions in the form of the *menalamba* movement (Ellis 1985). In contemporary Africa, there is abundant evidence that many people share the constant concern to control the influence of spirits which have been summoned for malign purposes or which, while not

necessarily good or bad in themselves, must be placated and controlled if evil is not to result. Evidence may be found on large scale spirit possession, of witch-hunting movements, in popular sermons, and in published literature. Some Western experts have mastered the imagery of the popular religious imagination well enough to write on the subject from the standpoint of believers (de Rosny). There is also an extensive popular literature by African believers in the form of religious tracts (Adom-Frimpong 1993).

We may take some examples of the latter to demonstrate the belief that the world is infested by witches and other persons who make use of spiritual powers for malign purposes, sometimes on a massive scale. A preacher in Zaïre, Evangelist Mukendi, who proclaims himself as a former witch, explain how he has seen the witches' underworld in which complexes of modern institutions are created and used by witches, including universities and an international airport in Kinshasa. In an extraordinary treatise on the underworld of sorcery, he records how 'every town or village in the world has some hidden human activities under the water nearby'. Here, the spirits of people who in life were controlled by the fallen angels, the agents of evil, congregate and communicate with the 'witch doctors, sorcerers and magicians' still living in the town (Kaniaki and Mukendi 1994). In their underwater lairs, the agents of the Devil feast on human flesh. They 'promote sorcerers, magicians and witch doctors' to high positions in the towns above ground, in the visible world. They manufacture diabolic objects underground, including 'cars, clothes, perfumes, money, radios and television sets' which they peddle above ground to try and 'distort and destroy the lives of those who purchase such items'. There are even underground scientists employed by the fallen angels. The ultimate purpose of all satanic activity of this type is 'to steal, kill and destroy' (Kaniaki and Mukendi 1994). According to Mukendi, who claims personal experience of these matters, some major underground cities are located in Zaïre, one near the Inga dam and another near Matadi. Here there are diabolical underground conference centres 'where many decisions affecting the countries and continent of Africa are effected'. These are on a large highway which connects them to other parts of Zaïre and to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean (Kaniaki and Mukendi, p. 41). Zaïre even has a 'very busy international airport for all sorts of sorcerers and magicians, flying in and out' (Kaniaki and Mukendi, p. 41). Some of the users of the witches' airport are African witches who transform themselves into white people.



> These false white persons will then get out of their 'planes' and enter into bigger ones awaiting at Mukamba Lake [the international sorcerers' airport], destined to Europe, America or any other countries of the world. Their purpose is to acquire jobs in those countries posing as specialists or expatriates, to earn big salaries to be used for the international organization of sorcerers of the world (Kaniaki and Mukendi, p. 42).

While Mukendi was a still a witch, he witnessed this and took part in such trips. The witches have a government, organized just like a visible government except that those in charge are women. There are witches' universities, with lecturers and staff.

Another account, from Nigeria, makes a similar point in describing the person of Lucifer, the Christian embodiment of evil. It describes how, when God made the world, He was in the position of absolute authority of a military commander-in-chief. He appointed Jesus his second-in-command, and he appointed Lucifer, before the Fall, as the chief of the angels. Extending this analogy in terms familiar to his public, this preacher describes how, in military jargon, Lucifer was the General Officer Commanding (GOC) the host of angels. In his vanity, Lucifer attempted a coup in heaven, organizing the water spirits into a naval force, and the witches and wizards to take charge of the land forces. This formidable array then launched a coup attempt against God. The loyal angels counter-attacked, managing to defeat the dissident angels thus (Okeke 1991:4):

> The day for the coup came. Lucifer and his followers got more than they bargained for. Their logistic and strategic plans failed. They were defeated almost before the coup execution started!
>
> The announcement was brief. A group of dissident angels led by Lucifer, the Commander-in-chief of the heavenly angels, had attempted to overthrow the kingdom of our Lord. The dissidents have been rounded up. All peace loving angels should go about their normal duties as every situation is under control. There would be no need for curfew as all the dissidents were arrested at less than the first second of the coup. The prince of peace is in firm control of every situation.

This version of the Fall of Lucifer from his place in heaven bears a close resemblance less to the Bible than to *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's great poem written in the aftermath of civil war and military dictatorship in seventeenth-century England. The details—the plans for a coup, the announcement that it has been defeated and that the

forces of order are all under control, that law-abiding citizens are to go about their business undisturbed—are perfectly adapted to a Nigerian public only too familiar with the rituals of martial music and the coup announcement broadcast on the radio.

Both of the texts quoted here are expressions in religious imagery, heavily loaded with political references, to a fundamental problem of all religion: the meaning and the origin of evil. In Christians theology, it is related to man's rebellion against God. In both texts this is seen as having given rise to a world in which evil spiritual forces shadow the visible ones and act upon them at all times. It is telling that the agents of the Devil are represented as fully modernized. In the text from Zaïre, they have their own universities, scientists and airports, and are able to infiltrate international organizations. In fact this text comes close to suggesting that the world of consultants and development experts is itself infested with evil-doers. It appears that this critique includes employees of the World Bank, for example, international experts on Africa par excellence, who might be shocked to know that they are considered agents of the Evil One.

All over the continent there is a flourishing business in the publication of tracts which describe experiences of evil or deliver precepts for the combating of evil. Generally speaking the value of these accounts lies in the fact that they are first-hand testimonies produced by Africans for other Africans, rather than second-hand accounts gleaned by Western social scientists who, by their very presence, may elicit a different type of discourse or who may misinterpret what they hear. Here is at least one voice of ordinary Africans as applied to their condition. Inasmuch as literature of this description, or sermons or other oral discourses, are recorded and analyzed by scholars it is likely to be in idioms of anthropology which do not easily seize the essential meaning of the accounts offered since anthropology is an agnostic discipline.

Analysts seeking to identify Africa's political malaise may see these expressions as metaphors, but the writers we have cited do not. They do not regard the spirit world as a metaphor for the 'real' or visible world, but as being an integral part of reality, in fact its most important part. In this sense the evolving political language of Africa tends to regard politics as a metaphor for movements in a spirit world



rather than vice versa. The real cause of human suffering or prosperity lies in the spirit world, of which human events are a mere reflection: it is in the spirit world that the ultimate cause of events is to be found, and it is here that the ultimate cause of Africa's misfortunes may also be found. Those who have entered the world of spirits, priests and healers, may therefore suggest in all seriousness that what is required is an alliance of forces—governments, priests and healers—to combat evil on the plane where it operates, which is a spiritual one. The logic of their argument is that African societies will not find political stability until they have found spiritual stability, and it is here that the debate is located at all levels of society.

**Religion as a Political Idiom**

In the norms of modern Western thought, applied to Africa by economic experts and technical consultants, government and politics should properly be the realm of a rational discourse aimed at instituting the rule of law and enhancing steady economic growth. Religion is a separate and subordinate sphere, to which missionaries, anthropologists or others may apply their own specialized skills. We have yet to find a World Bank report which mentions religion; so deep is the divide in Western thinking regarding the nature of the visible and invisible aspects of human behaviour that it is positively ludicrous to imagine such an institution taking this subject seriously enough to devote attention to a perceived world of spirits.

Even ritual experts schooled in the Western tradition, such as priests and theologians trained in missionary seminaries, seem to experience difficulty in articulating religious experience in precisely the terms which African worshippers recognize. This is certainly an important reason why, in Christian communities in Africa, there has been a marked movement away from the missionary-instituted or mainline churches towards African-instituted ones, a fact which has been the subject of diverse interpretations. In our view, the greatest single attraction of African-instituted churches to Africans is the fact that these churches permit worshippers to express themselves in their own religious language, particularly in regard to matters of spirit possession, spiritual subversion or witchcraft, and healing. In this regard the career of Emmanuel Milingo, the well-known former archbishop of Lusaka, is both important and exemplary. Milingo, born in 1930, became archbishop of Lusaka, Zambia, in a largely

Christian country, in 1969. During the 1970s he developed a gift of healing, discovering that he had the power to cast out devils in God's name and to invoke the Holy Spirit to fill his congregation. He behaved in absolute conformity with orthodox Catholic doctrine. Nevertheless, he encountered growing problems with his own Western-dominated church because of disquiet over his public mass exorcism of people who believed that problems in their lives were caused by the presence of evil spirits, a traditional belief in Zambia as in most of Africa. Hundreds of letters written to Milingo by supplicants in Zambia and, occasionally, elsewhere, were specific in their assumption that unemployment, illness, family quarrels, depression and other maladies were caused by evil spirits. In 1982 Milingo was called to Rome by the Vatican and eventually required to resign his archbishopric, apparently because the Church was ill at ease with his healing ministry. So, for that matter, was President Kaunda, who observed with disquiet the growth of a movement of Zambians who believed that problems both practical and psychological could be solved by an archbishop rather than by the government. Milingo's success, and his downfall, were his ability to articulate people's problems in terms which they understood exactly. In the classical Western lexicon, some of these problems might be termed medical, others psychological, and others political or economic. He was able to address all of these in a religious idiom of words and action (ter Haar 1992).

There are many other examples of people, acting generally as religious healers or prophets, who have been successful in addressing what we might regard as political or even economic problems by the application of religious discourse and action. The Naprama cult of counter-violence in Mozambique was, at least for a brief period, an effective antidote to the cult of violence espoused by RENAMO (Wilson 1992). Economic problems caused by drought have also given rise to religious movements whose object is to make rain fall, one of the duties expected of public authorities in traditional cosmology but also in modern ones (Wilson 1992). Several authors have contemplated the formation of idioms or systems of discourse which are, or can be, effective in African politics which, now or in the future, can have 'a generalizing and productive political language' (Berman and Lonsdale 1992:215). Such a language is emerging in the



idiom of religion, particularly in the form of so-called 'fundamentalist' movements.

**Fundamentalism**

Christians renewal movements in Africa of the type commonly labelled fundamentalist in fact date back to the end of the nineteenth century and more than anything else testify to a wish by many African Christians to escape the control exercised by foreign—generally European or North American—missionaries and priests and to interpret for themselves the basic Christian texts. Many are particularly preoccupied with the concern for spiritual healing, the elimination of personal illness and social evils by the exorcism of evil spirits perceived to be a real and deadly threat to mankind. One of the crucial differences between many African independent churches and the missionary or mainline churches is the willingness of the former to exorcise the evil spirits which many people believe to exist and the reluctance of the latter to perform this service. The difference is rooted in a differing perception of the reality of the spirit world. This often implies a radical break with popular traditions of pantheism or 'syncretism', the mixing of both imported and indigenous religious traditions. It is also a critique of the moral values of public power.

Many of the new religious congregations in Africa, particularly of the pentecostalist type, demand allegiance to one specific set of religious symbols, those of Christianity, and demand that their adherents refrain from all other practices such as ancestor veneration, the wearing of non-Christians protective objects, sacrifices and so on, regarding all of these as manifestations of the devil. In effect they are attempting to construct a new an simplified symbolism of belief out of the mass of traditions and systems existing in Africa and a reinterpretation of spiritual life into a dualistic category of good and evil. Several authors have noted that older spiritual beliefs were changed by Christian dualism which represented all non-Christians spirits as the work of the devil. Although there is no Muslim equivalent of the growth of healing churches, Islam in sub-Saharan Africa has also been subject to periodic waves of renewal, particularly in West Africa where missionaries with purified beliefs often acquired in Saudi Arabia have systematically preached reform, often combined, as in northern Nigeria, with the construction of new political systems. Fundamentalism—Christians or Muslim offers to

believers a unified, textually-based code to good and evil, absolute and clear, which promises a way out of the moral confusion of African societies. They do battle with evil as they see it, which includes all the numerous other systems of belief, including the nature spirits and other invisible forces which many people believe to be all around them and the witches who do such harm. In the absence of well-functioning political systems they offer a radical means of restructuring power.

The challenge to Africans is to develop a new language of politics which incorporates the role of public authorities as upholders of the cosmic order while also being comprehensible internationally. Clearly, Muslim fundamentalism is an attempt to do this, as is Christian fundamentalism, especially in the form of charismatic churches. The challenge to academics is to understand this language of public affairs not as a sign of a new form of exoticism, but as catalyst to a debate on the proper functions of power.

## Notes

1. Debatable exceptions are Swaziland, whose king is also a religious dignitary, and the kingdom of Morocco, whose king claims descent from the Prophet Mohammed, as are Islamic republics such as Mauritania and Sudan.
2. For an overview, Stephen Ellis (ed.), 1995, *Africa Now: People, Policies and Institutions*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Hague, and James Currey, London.
3. Webster's dictionary. We are grateful to Ineke van Kessel for drawing our attention to this definition.
4. A good example is the Poro society of Liberia and Sierra Leone.
5. Tiebile Dramé, personal communication.
6. Solofo Randrianja, personal communication.
7. On radio trottroir in general, Stephen Ellis (1989). For a specific case, see Sabakinu Kivilu, 'La radio-trottoir dans l'exercice du pouvoir politique au Zaïre', in B. Jewsiewicki et H. Moniot, 1988, (eds.), *Dialoguer avec le léopard?*, L'Harmattan, Paris, pp.. 179-193.



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