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Religion and politics in Sub-Saharan Africa

Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar*

There is a thriving literature of religious tracts in Africa. The few formal bookshops, and the far more numerous market-stalls and itinerant hawkers who sell books, offer for sale pamphlets and popular works on religious subjects in every country of the continent, it would seem. Some are theological inquiries into aspects of the Bible or the Koran. Others contain moral lessons derived from these sacred books. Perhaps the most common category, however, is testimonies of personal religious experiences. Much of this literature hardly makes its way outside Africa and is only rarely to be found in even the finest Western academic libraries.[1]

The most puzzling genre, at least for anyone educated in modern Western academies of learning, is that of the numerous works on witchcraft and other perceived forms of evil, sometimes in the form of a description of a personal journey into a world of spirits. While many pious works on Christianity on sale in Africa are authored by American evangelicals and published in America, popular books on witchcraft and mystical voyages are almost invariably written by Africans and published locally. Similar material is circulated through churches, sometimes in the form of video recordings. This is also true of African-led churches in the diaspora, among African communities on other continents. It is impossible to know with certainty how many people give any credence to stories like these, but the indications are that very many do so. Not only do pamphlets describing mystical journeys appear to circulate in large numbers,[2] but such accounts may clearly

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[1] The popular works referred to in this article (such as those by Kaniaki and Mukendi, Pianim, and Okeke mentioned below) are taken from the authors' own private collections, having been bought in markets and shops in Africa. Even the excellent African Books Collective, the Oxford-based concern which distributes books outside Africa on behalf of some fifty leading African publishers, rarely handles the type of literature to which we refer.

[2] For example, D. D. Kaniaki and Evangelist Mukendi, *Snatched from Satan's Claws: an amazing deliverance by Christ* (Nairobi, 1994) is published in both English and Kiswahili. This text will be

be situated within an older tradition of stories about witchcraft and journeys into the underworld which is to be found in collections of folklore and even in the literature of high culture.[3] Studies of churches and of healers in almost any part of Africa indicate that incidents of perceived witchcraft and of shamanism or near-death experiences are relatively common, and probably have been for as long as it is possible to trace. Such evidence may be drawn not just from studies of the pentecostal churches which have attracted so much scholarly interest of late,[4] but also of many other sorts of church including African independent congregations, of Muslim communities and of indigenous religious traditions. Thus, the popular literature written by people who claim to have experienced spiritual journeys or to have expert knowledge of witchcraft is not, we believe, an ephemeral genre but rather represents a modern form of an important tradition of mysticism in Africa.

It is perhaps helpful to note that many such texts are treatises on evil. They may be read as expressions of deep concern about the moral confusion which reigns in societies where people are no longer able to distinguish easily between that which is good and that which is evil. In the considerable number of African countries in which political institutions have largely broken down, religious discourse can be seen as an attempted remedy by means of a reordering of power, as will be discussed in due course. To this extent these popular religious texts reflect the preoccupations of Africans concerning the way in which power is exercised in their societies. If it is often difficult for analysts operating in the Western academic tradition to penetrate the meaning of such works, this is for reasons which, we will assert, derive from some

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discussed in more detail below. A related discussion on popular literature is Michael Schatzberg, 'Power, legitimacy and "democratisation" in Africa', *Africa*, 63, 4 (1993), 445–61.

[3] For a spiritual journey in the form of modern literature, see e.g. Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (London, 1954) and, more recently, Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London, 1991). A rare publication by a non-African with deep personal experience of the subject is Eric de Rosny, *Les yeux de ma chèvre* (Paris, 1981), which became a best-seller in Africa.

[4] A pioneer in this field is Paul Gifford, whose work has inspired a growing interest among academics in the West. See Gifford, *The Religious Right in Southern Africa* (Harare, 1988); *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia* (Cambridge, 1993); as well as two edited volumes, *New Dimensions in African Christianity* (Nairobi, 1992), and *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa* (Leiden, 1995). A number of African scholars have also written on this subject, particularly in Ghana and Nigeria, but have attracted less international attention. See e.g. Matthews Ojo, 'The growth of campus Christianity and charismatic movements in western Nigeria' Ph.D., University of London (1986); Ojo, 'Deeper life Christian Ministry: a case study of the charismatic movements in western Nigeria', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 18 (1988), 141–62; and 'The contextual significance of the charismatic movements in independent Nigeria', *Africa*, 58 (1987), 175–92; Kingsley Larbi, 'The development of Ghanaian Pentecostalism: a study of the appropriations of the Christian gospel in twentieth century Ghana setting with special reference to the Christ Apostolic Church, the Church of Pentecost and the International Central Gospel Church', Ph.D., University of Edinburgh (1995).

common misapprehensions about the nature of religion and politics in Africa south of the Sahara. Since the texts to which we refer are concerned with power in African societies, or to be more exact, with the dangers which can arise when power is not properly organised and controlled, they can be considered a commentary on a world in which power is seen as being too often an instrument of evil people who use it to destroy peace and harmony. To that extent, they are also an oblique criticism of government or of misgovernment. Hence they cast an interesting light on the way in which religion and politics in Africa act upon each other.

There is widespread evidence that many Africans today continue to hold beliefs derived from traditional cosmologies which they apply to their everyday activities, even when they live in cities and derive their living from jobs in the civil service or the modern economic sector.[5] Contrary to what an older generation of Western scholars was inclined to believe, such views have hardly diminished with education. Religious belief operates 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. Some religious leaders minister to both rich and poor. In most countries plural religious allegiance is common at all levels of society, so that an individual may be a member of several religious congregations simultaneously, and in many parts of the continent may 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, or Sufism and reformed Islam, as in Sudan.

The present article, then, is an attempt to sketch a theory which we hope will clarify the relationship between religion and politics in Africa. We propose to proceed by steps from a discussion of what religion is, and how it may best be studied, to a brief analysis of a couple of popular religious texts chosen by way of illustration, before passing on to some further observations on the way in which power is organised and perceived in various African societies. Our text has been written with sub-Saharan Africa in mind, although it is possible that the theory which we outline is at least partly applicable to North Africa, and indeed some aspects may be of interest to observers of other parts of the world, for reasons which should become clear. It has also drawn examples mostly from the literature on Christianity rather than Islam simply due to lack of knowledge on our part.[6]

[5] See e.g. Abdou Touré and Yacouba Konaté, *Sacrifices dans la ville: le citadin chez le divin en Côte d'Ivoire* (Abidjan, 1990).

[6] On recent transformations of Muslim societies, see Louis Brenner (ed.), *Muslim Identity and*

Since politics is generally supposed to be concerned with the distribution of power in society, religious texts which discuss the latter are at least implicitly political in nature. However, we emphatically do not argue that the many popular texts about encounters with witches or about hidden universes of evil are simple allegories, critiques of politics written in code in order to avoid prosecution or other retribution. That has become hardly necessary in the last ten years, during which time most of Africa has acquired a remarkable press freedom which removes most need for criticism of a government to be oblique. It is rather that any discourse on the morality and organisation of power, even if such a discourse is written in religious idiom, has political implications in a continent where all power is widely believed to have its ultimate origin in the same source, namely the invisible world. Religious discourse thus has implications for states which certainly cannot be described as weak or in crisis, like South Africa. But the fact is that many African states do show symptoms of acute political fragility and in some dramatic cases, such as Somalia, Congo, Sierra Leone and many others, the conventional apparatus of the state functions hardly or not at all. Again, for the sake of clarity, we will state what we are not arguing: we do not contend that the emergence of new religious forms or new religious tendencies, including those Muslim and Christian movements sometimes labelled 'fundamentalist', is always a response to what has often been described as state collapse. On the contrary, it is clear that certain widespread religious trends, such as Islamic renewal and pentecostal revival movements, affect many parts of the world,[7] and in this sense Africa is merely undergoing a similar experience to that of some other continents. What we do point out is that such movements are not devoid of political significance in an African context, where there are deeply rooted concepts of power which tend to merge the religious and the political, and that such movements acquire a specific public role when the institutions of state have rotted away.

The short, highly readable religious texts which are so popular in Africa are not, then, conscious or even unconscious attempts to broadcast political messages in the conventional meaning of the word 'politics'. On the contrary, there is no reason to doubt that the authors

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Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa (London, 1993), and Mervyn Hiskett, *The Course of Islam in Africa* (Edinburgh, 1995).

[7] David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: the explosion of protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford, 1990), and David Westerlund (ed.), *Questioning the Secular State: the worldwide resurgence of religion in politics* (London, 1996).

of such texts believe themselves to be recounting true stories or discussing real occurrences, no matter how puzzling these may seem to those who do not believe that witchcraft or journeys to the underworld can possibly be real. Their meaning is to be sought less in a refined deconstruction of their symbolism, although the symbols used are indeed informative, than in considering how entire cultures come to consider reality in specific ways, including in terms of interaction between the visible and invisible forces which they believe to constitute the world and to determine its evolution. In short, we believe that the analysis of these religious texts should be based on one vital assumption: that the authors intend what they write to be taken literally, however unlikely it may seem.

INTERPRETING RELIGION

The interpretation of popular religious literature (and, *a fortiori*, of the oral expression of religion) in Africa poses problems for conventional modes of analysing both politics and religion.

The disciplines most widely used for writing on public affairs in Africa are political science and economics.[8] Neither of these two is equipped to encompass the belief, so widespread in Africa, that there exists a continuum between visible and invisible worlds, or that mankind shares its environment with spirits of various types which have a determining influence on the outcome of mundane transactions and with which direct communication is possible. Western analysts who attempt to study the role of religion in African politics often adopt an institutional approach which can hardly consider how religious ideologies come to have a bearing on the ways in which political power is actually perceived and exercised.[9] The work of those historians who have made the most interesting attempts to reconstitute past relationships between religion and politics[10] has made relatively little impact on the literature on contemporary politics and public affairs. An important exception, however, is a francophone school of political science, strongly influenced by a wider literature of philosophy, history

[8] For a comprehensive survey, see Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe and Jean O'Barr (eds.), *Africa and the Disciplines* (Chicago and London, 1993).

[9] E.g. Jeff Haynes, *Religion in Third World Politics* (Boulder, 1994); Leonardo A. Villalon, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal: disciples and citizens in Fatick* (Cambridge, 1995). A wide-ranging, although now rather dated, survey is Terence Ranger, 'Religious movements and politics in Sub-Saharan Africa', *African Studies Review*, 29, 2 (1986), 1–69.

[10] E.g. T. O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion* (London, 1972); Françoise Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madgascar au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1991).

and anthropology, which has succeeded rather better than the anglophone tradition of political science in incorporating religion in its frame of analysis.[11] Meanwhile, the most influential of all economic analysts of Africa, the World Bank, has incorporated certain insights from political science into its own analysis, maintaining that the root cause of Africa's economic problems actually lies in the nature of the continent's political institutions and the political culture of the people who officiate in them, or, in the World Bank's formulation, in 'a crisis of governance'.[12] In recent years this has given rise to an extensive literature on governance in Africa.[13]

If the study of African politics is mainly in the hands of political scientists and economists, the academic study of religion in Africa, meanwhile, is largely in the hands of anthropologists, the more so as the influence of writers trained in the disciplines of theology, church studies and the like has diminished in proportion as theology has lost the central place it once had in Western academic curricula. Anthropology was created as a formal intellectual discipline as a result of the expansion of European interests in Africa and Asia particularly. The earliest anthropologists of Africa were concerned above all to systematise the indigenous practices and beliefs which flourished in rural areas, where tradition was felt to exist at its most pure.[14] Many classic anthropological texts were based on the study of local institutions and cultures conceived of as traditional or closed systems which seemed destined to be eroded by the forces of modernisation. This approach continued to have a significant effect on anthropological views of African religion for decades. Only in more recent times have anthropologists studied the religious beliefs of Africans from a wider perspective, incorporating into their field of study, for example, new Christian communities,[15] and extending their inquiries to the ways in which religion and politics combine in contemporary Africa.[16]

[11] Jean-François Bayart, *L'État en Afrique: la politique du ventre* (Paris, 1989). Other relevant works from the same school include Jean-François Bayart, Achille Mbembe and Comi Toulabor, *Religion et modernité politique en Afrique noire* (Paris, 1993), and François Constantin and Christian Coulon (eds.), *Religion et transition démocratique en Afrique* (Paris, 1997).

[12] World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa: from crisis to sustainable growth* (Washington DC, 1989), p. 60.

[13] Two bibliographical surveys which include useful references to the literature on governance are Rob Buijtenhuijs and Elly Rijnierse, *Democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa 1989–1992*, Research Reports no. 51, Afrika-studiecentrum (Leiden, 1993); Rob Buijtenhuijs and Céline Thiriot, *Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1992–1995* (Leiden, Bordeaux, 1995).

[14] Sally Falk Moore, *Anthropology and Africa: changing perspectives on a changing scene* (Charlottesville and London, 1994), pp. 15–28.

[15] An early example of this trend is John Peel, *Aladura, a Religious Movement Among the Yoruba* (London, 1968).

[16] Influential examples are Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: the culture and history of a South African people* (Chicago and London, 1985), and David Lan, *Guns and Rain: guerrillas and spirit mediums in Zimbabwe* (London, 1985).

At the same time as anthropology has widened its scope, however, it has often failed to consider the central point of religion, which is, we have suggested, communication with a perceived spirit world. While fashions in anthropological analysis of religion come and go – Marxism, postmodernism, cognitive anthropology – many works on religion in Africa have in common the implicit supposition that religions are fallacious as representations of reality.[17] Some authors go as far as to consider religious thought a vehicle for almost anything except religion.[18] In short, contemporary anthropologists tend to consider religion as a metaphor expressing other fundamental elements in human societies. All analysts seem to agree, however, that there has existed in Africa, for as long as history is able to detect, a widespread belief in the existence of invisible beings which, to greater or lesser degree, influence human destiny. Such a belief is widely regarded as a basic definition of religion.[19]

One critic, Robin Horton, divides anthropologists of African religion into three categories: the Symbolists (those who see religion as a form of representation, comparable to poetry or music); the Fideists, 'who like to think of all religious life as the expression of an autonomous commitment to communion with Spiritual Being', and the Intellectualists, in which category Horton places himself, who understand religion in Africa as 'a system of theory and practice guided by the aims of explanation, prediction and control'.[20] Although there have been new developments in writing on religion in Africa since Horton first made these distinctions, his basic categorisation remains a viable one. Perhaps the main feature of the Intellectualist approach is its propensity to consider statements on religious matters in the first instance in the believers' own terms before attempting to translate these into a vocabulary more appropriate to other branches of learning. To borrow a word derived from 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 more detached, terms which correspond more closely to a Western approach based exclusively on

[17] E.g. Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: history and ideology in the circumcision ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge, 1986); Richard Werbner, *Ritual Passage, Sacred Journey: the process and organisation of a religious movement* (Manchester, 1989); Jean and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: ritual and power in postcolonial Africa* (Chicago and London, 1993); Pascal Boyer (ed.), *Cognitive Aspects of Religious Symbolism* (Cambridge, 1993); Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: a cognitive theory of religion* (Berkeley, CA, 1994).

[18] Cf. Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: christianity, colonialism and consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago and London, 1991).

[19] This definition of religion originates with Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917).

[20] Both quotations are from Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: essays on magic, religion and science* (Cambridge, 1997 pbk edn), p. 306.

the rational method of determining objective truth. It is important to note that this does not imply that an analyst who adopts the 'emic' form of analysis in the first instance has to share the religious beliefs of the people he or she studies; it implies only that the observer must initially suspend judgement by allowing the believers being studied (in this case Africans) the right to express matters in the terms they think appropriate. This is the approach which we will follow here.

Modern Africans, then, tend to believe in the existence of invisible forces which share the world with visible ones and to that extent they may be described as religious.[21] 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.[22] Some dynamic Christian and Muslim movements are often described as 'fundamentalist', a term which has become more misleading than useful and which we will try to avoid.[23] Among the common characteristics of new religious movements, including Christian charismatics and Islamists as well as others, are a highly visible occupation of public space, in the form of public ceremonies and parades; a frequent concern with combatting evil which often takes the form of rooting out perceived impurity; and a physical multiplication of places of worship such as churches and mosques which are springing up in bewildering number in towns and villages throughout the continent. There are entirely new movements such as the Unification Church or Moonies, introduced from Korea;[24] and there are revivals of traditional forms such as in witch-finding movements, which have reached epidemic proportions in South Africa.[25] Only in North Africa and Sudan has religious renewal taken on a distinctly political form in the shape of the well-known Islamist

[21] For a discussion of the role of religion in African philosophy, see e.g. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* (New York, 1992), pp. 107–36. That not all Africans are religious is made clear by Éloi Messi Metogo, *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique? Essai sur l'indifférence religieuse et l'incroyance en Afrique noire* (Paris, 1997).

[22] Reflections on the rise of new religious movements include Bennetta W. Jules-Rosette (ed.), *The New Religions of Africa* (Norwood, NJ, 1997); Rosalind Hackett (ed.), *New Religious Movements in Nigeria* (Lewiston, NY, 1987); Hackett, 'Revitalisations in African traditional religion', in Jacob Olupona (ed.), *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (New York, 1991), pp. 135–48; Hackett, 'African new religious movements', in Ursula King (ed.), *Turning Points in Religious Studies: essays in honour of Geoffrey Parrinder* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 192–200; Paul Gifford, 'Some recent developments in African Christianity', *African Affairs*, 93, 373 (1994), 513–34.

[23] For a critique of the notion of fundamentalism, see Gerrie ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise: African Christians in Europe* (Cardiff, 1998), ch. 9. We will follow some scholars of Islam in labelling modern exponents of political Islam as Islamists.

[24] On the Moonie presence in Zaïre and Angola, see 'Angola: oily enclave', *Africa Confidential*, 37, 1 (5 January 1996), 7.

[25] Isak Niehaus, 'Witch-hunting and political legitimacy: continuity and change in Green Valley, Lebowa, 1930–91', *Africa*, 63, 4 (1993), 498–530.

movements. Elsewhere, Christian and Muslim revivalists and followers of other movements seek less to create theocracies than to effect a change of heart in individuals or to purge society of evil and sickness. However a religious preoccupation with evil is not devoid of political implications, as we may see by taking some specific examples.

THE JOURNEY OF EVANGELIST MUKENDI: A BRIEF EXEGESIS

At this point, we will turn to an example of one of the popular religious texts referred to in the introduction to this article which provides an illustration of the belief that the modern world is infested by witches and other persons who make use of spiritual powers for malign purposes. In spite of its mystical form, this text is replete with political meanings due to its preoccupation with the extent of evil in society.

The text, published in English and Swahili, is by a Congolese Christian preacher who is well known in the west of the former Zaïre. The preacher, Evangelist Mukendi, tells the story of his life from the time he was weaned by a mermaid and pledged to Satan by his father, himself a witch. Mukendi, now born again in Christ, records the appalling experiences he had in his years as a witch. He describes how he travelled throughout the witches' underworld which, he claims, contains complexes of modern institutions created and used by witches, including universities and an international airport in Kinshasa. In this 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.[26] 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'.[27] According to Mukendi, who claims personal experience of these matters, some major

[26] D. D. Kaniaki and Evangelist Mukendi, *Snatched from Satan's Claws*, p. 38.
[27] Ibid., p. 39.

underground cities are located in former 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.[28] Zaïre even has a 'very busy international airport for all sorts of sorcerers and magicians, flying in and out'.[29] 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.[30]

Mukendi claims to have taken part in such trips while he was a witch. The witches have a government, organised just like a visible government except that those in charge are women. There are witches' universities, with lecturers and staff.

This text is an investigation in religious form and using religious imagery of a fundamental problem of human life: the meaning of evil. In some respects it is highly traditional, since in western Zaire, as in some other parts of Africa, access to the spirit world is often said to pass through water,[31] and the figure of the mermaid or female water-spirit is a familiar one, which is itself a subject of popular literature and, increasingly, of academic study.[32] Nevertheless, this is by no means a tale from folklore. On the contrary, it purports to be an autobiography which represents the agents of the Devil as fully modernised and as operating in the central institutions of society. They are said to have their own universities, scientists and airports, and to infiltrate international organisations. In fact this text comes close to suggesting that the world of consultants and development experts has been infiltrated by evil-doers. This may be inferred to include employees of the World Bank, for example, international experts on Africa *par excellence*, who would probably be shocked to know that they are considered agents of the Evil One.

[28] Ibid., p. 41. [29] Ibid., p. 41. [30] Ibid., p. 42.

[31] E.g. Wyatt MacGaffey, *Modern Kongo Prophets: religion in a plural society* (Bloomington, IN 1983), pp. 126–7.

[32] Cf. Victoria Eto, *Exposition on Water Spirits* (Nigeria, 1988); Kathleen O'Brien Wicker, 'Mami water in African religion and spirituality', in Jacob K. Olupona and Charles H. Long (eds.), *African Spirituality* (forthcoming).

This is not an isolated example of prophecy, testimony or other writing in contemporary African religious mode which discusses manifestations of evil said to infest the main institutions of Africa's governance, including heads of state and aid donors. By way of comparison we may cite the prophecy of a Ghanaian preacher, Reverend Ernest Pianim, who is well known as the administrator of a leading Christian charismatic movement in Ghana. Pianim has written a booklet in which, using the well-known Christian model of the Book of Revelation, he foresees the rise of Ghana from its current woes after the reign of the Antichrist. He identifies the Antichrist as none other than the European Union.[33]

Another comparison is a work on demonology published in Nigeria by a young pentecostal preacher, Reverend S. N. I. Okeke, a university student of economics. The particular interest of Okeke's text, for present purposes, lies in his use of military jargon. Okeke describes in detail the attempted rebellion by Lucifer, the fallen angel, against God, whom he refers to as the commander-in-chief of heaven. Jesus he describes as God's second-in-command, while Lucifer, before his fall, had the rank of general officer commanding (GOC) the host of angels. The following is Okeke's account of the battle in heaven when Lucifer launches his coup:[34]

> 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.

The description is adapted to a Nigerian public only too familiar with hearing normal radio broadcasts interrupted by martial music and a coup announcement. The assertion that all evil originated in a military coup in heaven has rich implications for any reader who contemplates the origins of the many evils which are so evident in contemporary Nigeria, whose governments have been often installed through military coups.

[33] Ernest Pianim, *Ghana in Prophecy* (Kumasi, 1995). This view seems to be related to the recent migration of Ghanaians to Europe.

[34] S. N. I. Okeke, *Satanic Ministers: the ministries of Lucifer* (Lagos, 1991), p. 4.

Evangelist Mukendi's text from the former Zaïre, then, is not unique. All over Africa there is a flourishing business in the publication of similar tracts which describe experiences of evil or which deliver precepts for the combatting 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 the accounts given to us through the mediation of social science. Here are the voices of at least some Africans concerning the condition of their societies, or to be more precise concerning the problem of evil in their societies.

Some analysts may consider expressions such as those briefly cited here to be metaphors, but the writers of such texts clearly do not. They do not regard the spirit world as a metaphor for the 'real' or visible world, but as 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. Evangelist Mukendi and comparable authors believe that the ultimate cause of human suffering lies in the spirit world. By the same standard, they also believe that the eventual source of human prosperity is situated in that same place. Indeed this is the main purpose of religious communication, such as prayer or other forms of ritual behaviour, which is intended to persuade beings in the spirit world to grant the supplicant's wishes. Those who claim to know the world of spirits 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 stability unless they find spiritual stability. Hence active debates on the nature of evil take place at all levels of society in Africa in a form which most Europeans or North Americans would regard as religious. This is reflected not only in the views of authors such as Mukendi, Pianim and Okeke, but also in those of leading politicians and their constituents. An interesting example is Kenya, whose head of state, Daniel arap Moi, established a presidential commission to inquire into the Cult of Devil Worship. President Moi, however, refused to publish the report of this body although he did attack the activities of Satanists in his country, implying that they were to be found in the ranks of opposition parties.[35] Meanwhile, some Kikuyu were convinced that the real location of Satanism was in the government itself.[36]

[35] *Africa Research Bulletin*, 33, 10 (1996), 12442a.

[36] Yann Droz, 'Si Dieu veut ... ou suppôts de Satan? Incertitudes, millénarisme et sorcellerie chez les migrants kikuyu', *Cahiers des études africaines*, 37, 145 (1997), 85–117.

RELIGION IN PUBLIC SPACE

Religion and politics have been linked throughout African history. In all known pre-colonial African political systems and states public religious performance played an important role. Perhaps it should be said at once, then, that since there is no reason to suppose that religious belief has ever declined in Africa, it is incorrect to speak of a revival. It would be most accurate to refer to the revival of public religion, or the revival of religion in the occupation of political space. Many of the most dynamic expressions of religious activity at present take the form of the renewal of Islam, most obviously in North Africa, sometimes inspired by Muslims who have studied in the Middle East or fought in Afghanistan and have returned home full of zeal to create a new political order. In Christian communities, such expressions often take the form of born-again movements which reflect the remarkable growth of pentecostalism worldwide.[37] In some places there is a noticeable renewal of traditional religion, such as in southern Nigeria.[38] Whatever the precise form this new religious dynamism takes, it is a tendency so marked as to require some explanation. This demands some prior consideration of the nature of religious belief in Africa in relation to public power.

In many societies of pre-colonial Africa rulers were endowed with sacred duties, such as causing rain to fall and crops to grow, and charged with upholding the cosmic order generally. 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 root cause in the invisible world. 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 invisible worlds. An example of this is the Poro society of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia.[39] Even in North Africa temporal rulers were expected to possess *baraka*, a power which came from the invisible world and which alone would ensure worldly success. In Madagascar a similar quality

[37] Martin, *Tongues of Fire*.

[38] Hackett, 'Revitalisations in African traditional religion'.

[39] Kenneth Little, 'The political function of the Poro', *Africa*, 35, 4 (1965), 349–65, and 36, 1 (1966), 62–72.

associated with the spiritual aspect of public power was (and still is) called *hasina*.

The connection between religion and politics or between religion and concepts of the state is thus rooted in history. The particular form which this takes varies from place to place, according to particular history, culture and circumstances. It is possible, and even necessary, to consider the connection between politics and religion partly in mechanical or managerial terms, since this is a large part of the actual stuff of politics. It is clear that, all over the continent, political elites make use of religious communities for purposes of mobilising voters, creating clienteles or organising constituencies. There are numerous examples. It is easy for us to understand why South Africa's President P. W. Botha should wish to address the Easter gathering of the Zion Christian Church in 1985, or why some years later the same event was attended by F. W. de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and Chief M. G. Buthelezi, all competing for political support. In Senegal, the influence wielded by marabouts or Islamic holy men belonging to the main Sufi brotherhoods has been recognised as a source of political influence for decades.[40] During the liberation war in Zimbabwe, the advice of mediums said to be possessed by the spirits of ancestors played a vital role in securing the support of the population.[41] These brief references are only some of the very many cases in which religion has served as a vehicle of political mobilisation. But if powerful temporal rulers can make use of religious clientelism, it is also the case that they can become alarmed by religious leaders who become too popular, as has happened in Zambia, for example, on more than one occasion.[42]

There is nothing peculiar to Africa about politicians seeking to make political capital out of displays of religious allegiance or respect. Politicians in almost every part of the world sometimes visit places of worship, especially during election campaigns, for the purpose of winning votes. This does not mean that they are necessarily believers themselves. In Africa, however, unlike in Europe or North America, there is reason to believe that political elites do not use religion solely as a means of increasing their base of popular support but that in many cases they also believe that access to the spiritual world is a vital resource in the constant struggle to secure advantage over their rivals in political in-fighting. This can be done by conventional techniques of

[40] Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, *Saints and Politicians: essays in the organisation of a Senegalese peasant society* (Cambridge, 1975).

[41] Lan, *Guns and Rain*.

[42] Hugo Hinfelaar, *Bemba-Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change (1892–1992)* (Leiden, 1994).

communication with the spirit world, including the use of sacrifices and protective objects or through divination. President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, widely considered one of the most successful and enlightened African heads of state and known as a staunch Catholic, used such methods in private throughout his career.[43] Only in his last years, however, when he devoted enormous resources to the construction of the great basilica in his home town of Yamoussoukro which was designed to perpetuate his power over generations as yet unborn, did his spiritual preoccupations become fully public.[44]

Many other heads of state are known to employ religious experts in their personal entourage to whom they turn for 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 those within his immediate circle.[45] A more controversial choice was that of President Mathieu Kérékou of Benin, who retained the services of Mohamed Amadou Cissé, nicknamed 'Djine' or 'the Devil', a Malian marabout who was known to have held a ceremony in which he publicly espoused the Devil,[46] and who had previously worked for other heads of state including President Mobutu of Zaïre and President Bongo of Gabon. Cissé was appointed a minister of state in the Beninese government, responsible for the secret services. He was eventually convicted of fraud in a major trial.[47] Other heads of state have founded esoteric cults which play an important role in rituals for their inner circle, such as President Didier Ratsiraka of Madagascar, whose palace included an extravagant temple dedicated to Rosicrucianism,[48] President Paul Biya of Cameroon, also a Rosicrucian,[49] and President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, a follower of Transcendental Meditation.[50] While it is good politics for a politician to make a public profession of religious allegiance in order to

[43] Jacques Baulin, *La politique intérieure d'Houphouët-Boigny* (Paris, 1982), pp. 116–18.

[44] Samba Diarra, *Les faux complots d'Houphouët-Boigny* (Paris, 1997), pp. 223–43.

[45] Beatwell Chisala, *The Downfall of President Kaunda* (Lusaka, 1994), pp. 45–51.

[46] Personal communication by Tiébilé Dramé, former minister of the Malian government.

[47] Maurice Chabi, *Banqueroute, mode d'emploi : un marabout dans les griffes de la maffia béninoise* (Porto Novo, no date).

[48] Personal communication by Solofo Randrianja, historian at the University of Tamatave.

[49] Jean-François Bayart, 'L'Afrique invisible', *Politique internationale*, 70 (1995), 287–99. Claude Wauthier, 'L'étrange influence des franc-maçons en Afrique francophone', *Le monde diplomatique*, 522 (Sept. 1997), 6–7, mentions the competition between Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry for the allegiance of francophone heads of state.

[50] This was widely reported in the Dutch press when the Mozambican government negotiated an arrangement with a TM foundation in the Netherlands.

win popularity, there is thus abundant evidence that heads of state also practice religion in private for no obvious clientelist motive. Quite simply, they, like most of their constituents, believe that real power has its roots in the invisible world and that therefore the cultivation of spiritual power is vital for their continued political existence.

Heads of state with spiritual advisors or private cults appear to believe that the weight of the affairs of state requires them to have access to esoteric forms of power 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, the evidence suggests, tend to believe in the importance of the invisible world just as their subjects do, but seek higher forms of power commensurate with the importance of the positions they seek to defend and of the burdens which they have to discharge. It is common to tenure of great power in all cultures that it imposes on its holders choices weightier than those facing most of their subjects, and that this takes power-holders into an exclusive moral realm.

In fact, the religious practices of the mighty in Africa, esoteric though they might be, are usually known to the population. In the days before press freedom became general in the continent in the 1990s, elite activities of this sort were favourite subjects of popular debate through *radio trottoir*.[51] Ordinary people understand well enough the role played by religion in elite struggles since many use techniques similar to those of their leaders to solve the problems of their daily lives by consulting healers, spirit mediums, priests, prophets, diviners and marabouts, by seeking the blessing of the ancestors or by attending religious services of every variety.

One consequence of the frequency with which members of the elite seek advice on their most intimate spiritual problems is that those marabouts and other spiritual experts who include politicians among their clientele themselves become brokers of power in the most mundane sense. The marabouts of the elite become repositories of highly confidential information, since those politicians who resort to their services will divulge their innermost ambitions in a bid to attain the power they crave. In this way a leading marabout may acquire inside knowledge of planned coups and other secrets of his elite clients,

[51] On *radio trottoir* in general, Stephen Ellis, 'Tuning in to Pavement Radio', *African Affairs*, 88, 352 (1989), 321–30. For a specific case, Sabakinu Kivilu, 'Le radio-trottoir dans l'exercice du pouvoir politique au Zaïre', in B. Jewsiewicki and H. Moniot (eds.), *Dialoguer avec le léopard?* (Paris, 1988), pp. 179–193.

as did Amadou Cissé in Benin. Another marabout, Amadou Oumarou 'Bonkano', also the chief of a national intelligence service, himself attempted a coup against his patron and employer, President Seyni Kountché of Niger.[52] In fact a spiritual expert who is frequented by members of the elite bears a close resemblance to the head of an intelligence service because of the confidential information he acquires. Thus a ruler who takes such a person into his service acquires access to a valuable source of worldly information as well as to invisible power. By the same token a ruler who refuses to frequent such people deprives himself of a vital source of information and of the influence of a perceived medium of supernatural power. This was one of the reasons, for example, for the downfall of Benin's President Nicéphore Soglo and the astonishing political comeback of Mathieu Kérékou, the born-again Christian who was once considered by certain of his countrymen as a Satanist.[53]

If the spiritual experts who frequent the palaces of the elite acquire worldly power through their activities, so in a different way do those popular religious leaders who acquire mass followings. Leading priests and prophets become important people in a political sense simply by reason of the number of their followers. They are not the only leaders from what is fashionably called civil society who may become influential by heading some sort of non-government association such as a professional association or a trade union. However, the influence wielded by a popular religious leader in Africa is different in many respects from that exercised by any other leader emerging from the non-state sector. A trade union leader, for example, may be able to articulate demands for higher wages or more jobs which a government can deal with by the conventional techniques of modern government and politics. A religious leader, on the other hand, is endowed with power perceived as stemming directly from the spiritual world, reflecting a world view which is foreign to 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 organisation may be placated with 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, an epidemic of possession by evil spirits.

[52] Robert B. Charlick, *Niger: personal rule and survival in the Sahel* (Boulder, 1991), pp. 69–70.

[53] Camilla Strandsbjerg, 'Religion and the interpretation of political power: aspects of political thinking in Benin', paper presented at the conference on Religion and Politics in Africa and the Islamic World, University of Copenhagen, 1–3 Oct. 1997.

Temporal rulers attempting to govern populations who believe that their daily life is affected by powers stemming from the invisible lack institutional means of control. 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 recognised political authorities of the country had no control. In the end this caused such political disquiet as to cause President Kaunda to become an accomplice to Milingo's removal by the Vatican.[54] Spiritual leaders who develop a mass following in this way are particularly difficult for governments to deal with, even when they have no political ambitions. Even if religious leaders do aspire to play a role in government, they find it difficult to acquire political power on the basis of a purely spiritual authority. This may be one explanation 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 were unlikely to turn their office into the base for a presidential campaign.[55]

Even in the heyday of one-party states, when heads of state controlled virtually every organ of associational life, the spirit world was always more elusive. Some rulers, like Presidents Mobutu of Zaïre[56] or Eyadema of Togo,[57] 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 government and politics may be managed with appropriate doses of patronage and coercion, the spiritual world is less easy to govern, particularly in a continent where belief in prophecy and spirit possession is widespread and where access to spiritual power is believed to be within the reach of all. In principle anyone can communicate with the world of the spirits and receive messages from that source. People believed to be 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

[54] Gerrie ter Haar, *Spirit of Africa: the healing ministry of Archbishop Milingo of Zambia* (London, 1992), pp. 199–200.

[55] Metena M'Nteba, 'Les conférences nationales africaines et la figure politique de l'évêque-président', *Zaïre-Afrique*, 276 (1993), 361–72.

[56] Allen F. Roberts, L'authenticité, l'aliénation et l'homicide: une étude sur le processus social dans les zones rurales au Zaïre', in Jewsiewicki and Moniot, *Dialoguer avec le léopard?*, pp. 327–51.

[57] Comi Toulabor, *Le Togo sous Eyadéma* (Paris, 1986), esp. pp. 105–31.

respect to the social or political norms in vogue. This poses a constant threat to the ideological order and thus to political stability. This was also the case in colonial times, as many examples testify.[58] It is not a peculiarity of recent decades.

POWER AND INSTITUTIONS

Religious revival movements of various sorts have had an increasing impact in the public realm of many African countries over the last twenty years. This roughly coincides with a decline of the formal apparatuses of state and government over the same period. The same period has also witnessed an explosion of the type of popular religious literature which we have earlier discussed. While it would be too simple to regard this as a simple case of cause and effect, there are reasons to believe that these two factors are connected.

Africa, of course, is not alone in seeing the emergence of new religious movements in the last two decades, some of which have become political forces, as examples from Asia and America will testify.[59] Hence it would not be correct to argue that new religious movements have emerged in Africa solely in order to fill a vacuum in public life. Moreover, dynamic new political movements have emerged also in African countries where the state cannot be said to be heading towards crisis, such as South Africa. Our observation is simply that such religious movements are rarely devoid of political implication and that when they do emerge in a country where the state is unable to fulfil its expected functions in regard to the law and public order, religion can take on a specific importance.

Before examining this matter further, it is useful to dwell briefly on the travails of African states and the ways in which these are normally described. 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. This is partly a reflection of the fact that the dominant academic mode of contemplating Africa in the years since independence has been in terms of economic development. More specifically, the World Bank and the International

[58] A good example is Simon Kimbangu, concerning whom see Marie-Louise Martin, *Kimbangu: an African prophet and his church* (Oxford, 1975). Karen E. Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton, 1985) studies the reaction of colonial administrations to a range of spiritual movements.

[59] Examples include the role of the Unification Church in Korea, the rise of the Religious Right in the United States and the establishment of an Islamic government in Iran.

Monetary Fund, both of which are dominated by economists, have acquired enormous weight in African affairs since 1980.[60] These institutions have produced an important corpus of literature on Africa and have had a substantial influence on the way in which the continent's public life is analysed both in the academic world and by policy-makers. Today, inasmuch as the industrialised world has a coherent view of Africa, it is that African countries need to enact political reforms which will create public institutions better able to design and implement rational policies conducive to stability and economic growth.

The institutions of state which have decayed so markedly in Africa in the last two decades, and which the major donors are now struggling to restore to working order, are those originally established by European colonial powers in conformity with the norms applying in Europe itself at the time.[61] Briefly, colonial administrators supposed that government should be through modern, bureaucratic organs of a state of which the proper function is to uphold a rational system of law and to design and implement rational policies. These policies, generally speaking, depend on material inputs of resources for the satisfaction of specific aims deemed to be in the common good. The identification of this common good is made, in the last resort, by political authorities. In the colonial times these were situated in European metropoles but these days they are located in Africa's capital cities. It is noteworthy that this conception of government introduced in colonial times is almost identical to the concept of 'good governance' so much in vogue among donors today.

The religious revival in Africa can be said to reflect a concern with poor governance, expressed in a different idiom, inasmuch as new religious movements are often centrally concerned with the problem of evil in society and are looking for alternative sources of power. Even in countries with states which remain strong, the emergence of new religious movements can reasonably be seen as attempts to locate new sources or forms of power. In effect, many forms of religious revival challenge the very bases of legitimacy of states which operate through institutions and norms of governance originally created in colonial times. In this regard Islam, unlike Christianity, offers a specific view of

[60] This was the date of application of the first Structural Adjustment Programme, concerning Senegal.

[61] For a statement of these norms, expressed by a leading theorist who was writing at precisely the time such institutions were being introduced in Africa, see Max Weber (ed. Max Rheinstein), *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society* (Cambridge, MA, 1954).

government in the form of theocracy. In general, many new religious movements in Africa can be seen as attempts to revive a known source of power. Spiritual power, unlike political power, is situated not in institutions themselves, nor in the will of the people, but in the world of the invisible.

It is helpful to consider the revival of religion in relation to the dysfunction of states in this light. In the large number of African examples where religion is strong and states prove unable or unwilling to uphold a monopoly of violence or the rule of law, spiritual belief offers access to an alternative form of power and provides a social cement. In this sense the resurgence of religion is directly connected to the erosion of secular state apparatuses in cases where the latter has occurred. This may be described as the revival of tradition in a radically changed context. Unlike in pre-colonial times, every part of Africa is now directly linked via money economies to world markets and via electronic media to world sources of information. It is striking that the present forms of religious revival are generally those of the world religions of Islam and Christianity, which thus link Africa to worldwide cultural systems. They also reflect the literacy which is now widespread in Africa where, less than a century ago, it was rare indeed.

Religion and politics are both systems of ordering the power inherent in human society, 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 these two systems of harnessing or manipulating power have been subject to sharp organisational and intellectual distinctions which conform to the separation of politics and religion or church and state. Colonial governors and missionaries attempted to reorganise the language of power into similar political and religious idioms. 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 but also for example of China, which has a long tradition of religious risings intended to rid the empire of demonic influence at times of acute disorder.[62] Thus, while the present essay concentrates on Africa, our observations may be situated in a broader debate on the way in which many peoples in what used to be called the Third World are reordering the systems by which power is acquired and distributed in their societies in the aftermath of a century and more

[62] W. J. F. Jenner, *The Tyranny of History: the roots of China's crisis* (London, 1992), pp. 198–200.

of subjection to institutions originally imposed on them by Europeans or otherwise acquired as a result of Western influence.[63]

THE MORAL VALUE OF POWER

Power is usually defined as the ability of a person to induce others to act in the way that he or she requires.[64] 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 considered the prerogative of gods. Or, as Nietzsche noted, 'every high degree of power always involves a corresponding degree of freedom from good and evil'.[65]

Politicians, being powerful, have the capacity to make choices of great consequence, and the less they are trammelled 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 institutions regarded as having the legitimate authority to regulate power in both the political and religious spheres. In the absence of such institutions the abuse of political and religious power can create moral confusion and even panic. In small communities, such as a village or a family, this may take the form of witchcraft accusations,[66] but related forms of moral confusion may occur in a larger community, even within a nation.[67] Distinguishing between good and evil and understanding the nature of evil are major preoccupations of the popular religious tracts to which we have referred throughout the present text.

Modern Africa in many cases lacks entrenched protocols of power in both the political and the spiritual fields. To take a common enough

[63] Jean-François Bayart, 'L'historicité de l'état importé', in J.-F. Bayart (ed.), *La greffe de l'Etat* (Paris, 1996), pp. 11–39.

[64] Alan Bullock and Oliver Stallybrass (eds.), *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (London, 1977), p. 490.

[65] F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, quoted in *The Penguin Dictionary of Political Quotations* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 122.

[66] Ineke van Kessel, '"From Confusion to Lusaka": the youth revolt in Sekhukhuneland', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 4 (1993), 593–614.

[67] Peter Geschiere, *Sorcellerie et politique au Cameroun: la viande des autres* (Paris, 1995), pp. 125–63, describes how villagers may perceive national political problems as a form of witchcraft. For a discussion of the idea of spirit possession on a national scale, Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis, 'Spirit possession and healing in modern Zambia: an analysis of letters to Archbishop Milingo', *African Affairs*, 87, 347 (1988), 185–206. Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: war, youth and resources in Sierra Leone* (London and Portsmouth, NH, 1996), pp. xxiv–xxv, sees fear of cannibalism as a form of similar moral panic on a national scale.

example, 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 he will not, since experience shows that the use of illegitimate violence in the formative act of taking power may well lead to the commission of further acts of violence in its exercise. Similarly the purpose of religious performance may not be clear until its results become apparent in the absence of a generally acknowledged structure of religious authority. Just as a politician who proclaims himself to be the saviour of the nation may turn out to be no such thing, so may a self-proclaimed prophet or healer turn out to be a charlatan or to bring disaster in their wake.[68]

In popular imagery evil-doers 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 power 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. In Zaïre, for example, the government of President Mobutu was sometimes considered to be an elite conspiracy of witches, who consulted marabouts of sinister reputation at night in an effort to enhance their power.[69]

In view of this, it is relevant to discuss why certain heads of state have consciously sought recourse to individual experts, or to cults, widely believed in Africa to be fundamentally evil in origin, such as Rosicrucianism.[70] The answer seems to lie in the precariousness of power in Africa. A ruler who has struggled and fought, often 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 power to survive. In such conditions any source of additional power becomes attractive. In many traditional African religions instant earthly power is believed to be obtainable through sacrifices, by the spilling of blood. In the Christian tradition the ultimate source of all power lies with God. However, the granting of earthly power and wealth is also considered one of the principal assets of the Devil, the incarnation of evil. One of the effects of Christian evangelisation in Africa has been to demonise certain traditional religious beliefs, notably concerning blood sacrifice. Hence, the spilling of blood for

[68] A good example appears to be the Ugandan prophetess Alice Lakwena. Tim Allen, 'Understanding Alice: Uganda's Holy Spirit Movement in context', *Africa*, 61, 3 (1991), 370–99.

[69] Jean-Pierre Diamani, 'L'humour politique au *Phare* du Zaïre', *Politique africaine*, 58 (1995), 151–7.

[70] P. F. Bradford, D. J. Williams, Y. Pwol, C. H. Cheal and T. B. Dankwa, *The Christian Attitude: witchcraft and charms, drinking, cults, marxist socialism, sickness* (Achimota, Ghana, 1980), pp. 54–9, is a popular work which explicitly labels Rosicrucianism as a devilish cult.

whatever purpose has in many places become associated with evil, considered to be the realm of Satan. Since God, the source of all good, is deemed by Christians to grant power only in his own time and for benign purposes, a politician desperate for instant power and wealth may see little alternative other than to perform an act which will be widely viewed as diabolic, and whose consequences may therefore be anticipated as malign. The former archbishop of Lusaka, Emmanuel Milingo, one of Africa's leading demonologists,[71] 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.[72]

We have noted that the academic literature on Africa in recent years has been dominated by studies of the deficiencies 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. There is reason to believe that many Africans, in pondering 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. This becomes particularly clear in the idiom of witchcraft, as may be seen in both academic and popular literature. Many modern Cameroonians, for example, have come to the conclusion that the rapidity with which political careers rise and fall is explicable only by reference to witchcraft.[73] Both during and since the colonial period many countries have witnessed witch-finding movements inspired by a widespread belief that witches are at large 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.

RELIGION AS A POLITICAL IDIOM

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

[71] Emmanuel Milingo, *Face to Face with the Devil* (Victoria, Australia 1991).
[72] Emmanuel Milingo, *Plunging into Darkness* (Victoria, Australia 1993).
[73] Geschiere, *Sorcellerie et politique*, pp. 125–40.

'sorcery' to describe ideas whose fluidity and nuances may be significantly different in African languages and African thought.[74] 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 terms which are familiar to African worshippers. 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-initiated ones.[75] A major attraction of African-initiated churches is the fact that these churches openly address matters of spirit possession, spiritual subversion or witchcraft, and healing. In this regard the career of Archbishop Milingo is both significant and exemplary. 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. Milingo was able to address all of these in a religious idiom of words and action.[76] There are many other examples of religious healers or prophets who have been successful in addressing what we might regard as political or economic or even military problems by 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.[77] 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, in Mozambique for example.[78]

Some leading authors have contemplated the formation of idioms or systems of discourse which are, or can be, effective in African politics as 'a generalizing and productive political language'.[79] Such a language is in fact emerging in the idiom of religion. This is particularly

[74] Ibid., pp. 20–1, and pp. 279–86. A further useful survey of the literature on witchcraft is Simeon Mesaki, 'The evolution and essence of witchcraft in pre-colonial African societies', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 24 (1995), 162–77. The originator of much of the vocabulary in use is Edward Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1st edn 1937; reprint Oxford, 1977), pp. 8–12.

[75] Cf. Arthur F. Kulah, *Theological Education in Liberia: problems and opportunities* (Lithonia, GA, 1994), esp. pp. 45–61.

[76] Ter Haar, *Spirit of Africa*.

[77] K. B. Wilson, 'Cults of violence and counter-violence in Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1992), 527–82. A general survey of traditional religion and warfare is Stephen L. Weigert, *Traditional Religion and Guerrilla Warfare in Modern Africa* (New York, 1996).

[78] Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London, 1995), p. 576.

[79] Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, 1992), p. 215.

apparent in the case of born-again Christians who seek to change society by transforming every individual, and Islamists who aspire to do the same by creating a theocracy. Both Christian and Muslim movements of renewal have important antecedents in African history but they often consciously reject many of their own country's religious traditions, considering them at best as irrelevant to their project or at worst as so much evidence of the Devil's work. Many Christian revivalist movements today, while they appear to some observers as pure American imports,[80] are more accurately seen as simply the latest generation in the century-old tradition of African-initiated churches, all of which may be located in the longer history of evangelicalism. Many of these new churches regard the older generation of 'spiritual' or 'white garment' churches as following practices drawn from traditional African religions which they associate with the work of the Devil. This is a sign of just how preoccupied they are with combatting evil. Similar generational trends are observable in Islam, whose current reforming zeal in Africa may be usefully compared with the nineteenth-century revival movements of Usman dan Fodio and El Hajj Omar. African Islam has been subject to periodic waves of renewal, particularly in West Africa where missionaries with purified beliefs acquired in foreign centres of Islamic learning have preached reform, sometimes combined, as in northern Nigeria, with the construction of new political systems.[81]

Modern religious radicals often argue in favour of a break with popular practices of combining imported and indigenous religious traditions. In doing this, such radicals are also making a statement about the way in which public power should be organised and about the immorality of present systems. They aim to cut through the prevailing moral confusion by making a clear distinction between what they perceive as good and what they perceive as evil. In effect they are attempting to construct a new and simplified system of belief out of the mass of traditions and institutions existing in Africa by reinterpreting life in dualistic categories. They are proposing a new basis for the legitimacy of public power, including that exercised by a state. Hence it is small wonder that many leaders, whether declaring themselves to be born again in Christ like Zambia's President Frederick Chiluba or Benin's President Kérékou, or whether by multiplying the outward signs of personal piety like almost all the leaders of the continent,

[80] Gifford, *The Religious Right.*
[81] H. A. S. Johnston, *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto* (London, 1967), pp. 26–102.

attempt to bestow religious legitimacy on themselves. In countries where the state apparatus has been eroded to an alarming degree, such as Congo, Somalia, Sierra Leone and others, religious movements in the long term may offer not just a new basis for legitimising power, but even a means of restructuring some sort of apparatus which will fulfil the functions of government.

There is a risk that, if the process of turning religion into an idiom of politics develops along the present lines, African politics will become increasingly incomprehensible to outsiders. Discourses on witchcraft and on the unseen world of evil, like that of Evangelist Mukendi, who declares himself to have been saved from Satan by the power of Christ, may be relevant to many Africans but they are not easily understood by others. A challenge to Africans is to develop a new language of politics which incorporates the role of public authorities as upholders of cosmic order while also being comprehensible internationally. The challenge to academics is to understand this language of public affairs not as a symptom of a new form of exoticism, but as a debate on the proper function of power in Africa.[82]

[82] On exoticism in African studies, see Christian Coulon, 'L'exotisme peut-il être banal? L'expérience de *Politique africaine*', *Politique africaine*, 65 (1997), 77–95.