

WHOSE “RELIGION” AND WHOSE “VIOLENCE”? DEFINITION AND DIVERSITY IN AFRICAN STUDIES

Introduction to the Special Issue on Religion and Violence in Africa

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Abstract: This introduction explores some complications in identifying religion and violence in African imaginations. The meaning of both terms can be contested when applied to sub-Saharan Africa, where “reenchanted traditions” (J.-A. Mbembé, “African Modes of Self-Writing”) have emerged as features of African regional wars. Examples show the necessity for expanded perspectives on religion and violence, beyond European categories of thought. Then the introduction summarizes the essays within issue 4.1.

Key words: spiritual warfare, initiation rituals, African syncretism, reenchanting tradition, epistemology, music and ritual

We are pleased to offer this issue dedicated to religion and violence in Africa. Against the diversity of African traditions and emergent issues, our articles here cover a small but important sampling of topics. Two address cultural versus human rights—one Church sponsored anti-gay propaganda and another the practice of female genital cutting—and two address religion and violence in the countries of Libya and Nigeria, respectively. In contemplating these articles as well as new, deepening studies on religion in Africa, we realized the necessity for a preliminary excursus on the problematic nature of the umbrella terms religion and violence. In earlier issues (e.g., 2.2) we have argued that both are contestable terms, but perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than

in African studies. This introduction touches on the slipperiness of those notions and then describes the contributions to this issue of the Journal.

THE NOTIONS

Both “religion” and “violence” resound with colonial implications: Religion defined by whom? Violence defined by whom? Just about every lens through which outsiders have viewed African cultures has been colored by categorizations drawn from European discourse.¹ Part of the excitement of studying Africa is the extent to which those categorizations fail to capture the vibrancy of African regional imaginations.² On the one hand that failure is triggering new, more compatible conceptualizations to try to make sense of those imaginations; but even where such conceptualizations fail, or possibly because they fail, awareness of the intricate cultural mosaic in Africa has spurred a surge of global fascination. We see now not only a flourishing scholarly discourse on African religions, but also enthusiasm for African exports in music, art, literature, and lately film. African distinctiveness aside, though, it is undeniable that Christianity and Islam have taken root in Africa and now resonate throughout its public spheres (Hackett 2011). Yet, historically, these roots have intertwined with traditional ones in complex ways.

African Religion?

We are told that the blunt tools of Western religious analysis are too dull to grasp the historical intricacies of African experience. To start, there is no exact equivalent of the English term “religion” in most traditional African languages, particularly if we restrict our notion of religion to belief in supernatural beings. Rather, a number of indigenous terms offer a more holistic view, inclusive of sense of tradition, ways of life, beliefs and practices, etiquette and social norms (Opoku 2009). It would be a mistake to reify a dimension of religion as severed from everyday life in traditional societies. At the same time we are also told that, African heterogeneity notwithstanding, subjectivities for many Africans today still are informed by relationships to divine sovereignty (Mbembé 2002), but these sovereigns are interpreted locally. Creator gods involved in the ongoing process of creating life and passing judgment after death are common, but equally common is a plethora of mediating forces, such as lesser gods, ancestors, and a persistent world of spirits (Baum 2013).

¹For the invented nature of African identity in its various phases, in response to numerous factors, see Mbembé (2002).

²On these failures, see Baum (2010), Opoku (2009), and Wiredu (2010), who touch on presumptions which distance Western thinking from African categories of thought.

The notion of a persistent world of spirits puzzles some Western analysts. Notoriously, supranormal dimensions to life were dismissed by the cultural evolutionists (e.g., Tylor, Frazer) as vestiges of a bygone mentality, and are dismissed today by the cognitive evolutionists (e.g., Barrett, McCauley, and Lawson) as perceptual errors deriving from the acute sensitivities we once honed to survive as predators and prey, in prehistoric times. In addition, surely some political analysts will decry a focus on these same supranormal perceptions as simply sensational and demeaning, no longer relevant to African realities.

Yet, over the last few decades, discerning Africanists have argued persuasively against the universality of Western, enlightenment-based paradigms for human imagination. Instead, they point out, the rigid divides of material and immaterial realities presumed in Western discourse are incapable of capturing persistent and dynamic strands of African imagination, which have proved remarkably resilient, creative, and also accretive in the face of Western hegemony in modes of thought.³ One such strand, corresponding to the penetrating world of spirits, is the porous boundary of personhood. Hence, in his exploration of witches and the occult in Kenya, Robert Blunt challenges the constraints of positivist epistemologies and restricted notions of personhood assumed by the West. Blunt notes that Kenyan oracular forces are felt to impact a "spoken-through" person rather than a "neatly bound" one. It is only by taking into consideration the porous boundaries between person, world, and spirits that one can grasp the "implosive and traumatic effects of occult anxiety and its concomitant forms of social action" (Blunt 2013, 331). To soothe the turmoil, the spiritually afflicted seek out aggregate traditions and authorities (Blunt 2013, 336–337), reflecting the pluralism of African resources responsive to such afflictions. It is arguable that this porous boundary of personhood is of-a-pace with the philosophical notion of intentionality, but Africa boasts its own idioms, such as the concept of *ubuntu* (Bongmba, this issue), as well as its own regional imaginaries, to make sense of this porosity.

The porous boundaries of self might also be studied through musical ritual. Reporting on fieldwork in Malawi and Ghana, ethnomusicologist Stephen Friedson notes from first-hand experience the conjuring capacity of cross-rhythmic drumming rituals which trigger the immediate sensation of something—god, spirit, ancestor, or the like—entering and leaving the body, for participants and audiences alike (1996; 2009). The experience is

³On this accretive quality, the scholarship is vast. See, e.g., Meyer (1992), White (2000), Behrend (1999; 2011), Ellis and Ter Haar (2004; 2007), Hackett (2011), Włodarczyk (2013), and Olupona (2014).

pre-discursive. Ewe drummers in Ghana strive to engage participants in the “*force vitale* of a saturated and animated engagement with the world” (2009, 188). Such experiences, Friedson asserts, are incompatible with the Cartesian dualisms presumed in the West. Given current studies of ethnomusicology, there is nothing peculiarly African about this musical/ritual engagement,⁴ except perhaps that awareness of it is keen in Africa, where musical engagement has been exploited in civil conflicts (see ahead).

As for religious imports to Africa, scholars would be remiss to ignore the supple weave of new and old traditions that we see in African independent churches and indigenized Islam. Two centuries of African millennial movements are sometimes deemed indicia of the precarious meeting of imported and traditional thinking, but the integrative capacity of African imaginations is also well-acknowledged.

Ugandan Acholi traditions illustrate this integrative capacity. Traditional Acholi *jok* spirits have been shown to have merged creatively with free *jogi* (pluralized *jok*) around the time that Arab and other traders caused the free *jogi* to be introduced (1850s).⁵ These imported *jogi*, initially empowered to mediate threats from an outside world, came to be associated with cults of affliction during that uncertain time and to possess and speak through Acholi mediums. When British missionaries entered Northern Uganda in the early 1900s, they forcefully relegated all *jogi* but one, Rubanga, to a satanic sphere; the imposition of this dualistic scheme led to a rise in witchcraft rumors in association with the dispossessed *jogi* (Kustenbauder 2010). Later, in the 1940s, Holy Spirit movements indigenized the *jok* spirits once again, and their powers were harnessed for mystical warfare (Behrend 1999; Kustenbauder 2010). Prophets and healers cultivated access to these *jogi* in order to manipulate extraordinary realms of power to combat what were perceived as evil forces. This is famously the case with the more recent Ugandan Holy Spirit movements associated with Alice Lakwena and Joseph Kony, both of which mobilized hundreds of *jogi*—some local spirits, others biblical personae, still others drawn from popular culture and martial arts films (Behrend 1999). Recently, Holy Spirit Mobile Forces have aimed not only to purify society from evil, but more radically to impose sacramental terror on evil’s representatives (Van Acker 2004). Given the enduring nature of these traditions, their fluid adaptability to both internal and external pressures, and lately their injurious aims, to ignore them would be to miss the region’s creative synergy in times of crisis.

⁴See, e.g., Becker (2004), Alcorta and Sosis (2005), and Dissanayake (2006).

⁵For a discussion of the emergence of Acholi identity in response to colonial influences, see Doom and Vlassenroot (1999).

African Violence?

Violence is just as culturally intricate and indigenized as religion. Violence *per se* being quite relative, especially in the sphere of religious studies (Kitts and Jerryson 2014), let us consider the less disputable example of war. Reports of civil wars in north and also sub-Saharan Africa, particularly wars with religious inflections, have echoed far and wide over the last three or four decades, and are sometimes bewildering to outsiders. This bewilderment is not just because of the genocidal scale of some of these wars, but also because the notion of spiritual warfare, as described above, introduces dimensions of power and sensation that elude the grasp of many. Some recent studies of sub-Saharan wars highlight realms of secrecy, traumatic initiation, and assault sorcery, whereby occult practices are thought to channel hidden powers. Contemporary researchers might relegate these realms to structural violence, referring to subtle cultural vehicles for restricting personhood and inflicting harm, but it is notable that these practices can also aggrandize persons and protect them from harm. To grasp any of this, one must cultivate a regional perspective.

Problems of regional perspective can be illustrated by a glance at the initiation rituals of Mende secret societies during the civil conflicts in Sierra Leone in the 1990s. From a Western perspective, these rituals involved the infliction of intense bodily distress, if not outright damage to bodily integrity, and grotesque dietary and costuming behaviors; yet their goal was not pain, damage, or shock, but empowerment and transformation. Acts such as bodily cutting and scarring, reputed cannibalism, and the wearing of corporeal amulets were framed in terms of traditional invincibility metaphors for Kamajors, or hunters, charged at this point with defending their communities against the Revolutionary United Front ("RUF") (Włodarczyk 2009, 27–49, 81–91; Ellis 1995). By rumor, Kamajor members applied immunizing potions to cuts ritually inflicted on initiands; initiands consumed concoctions containing human tissues or organs; and they donned clothing and symbols constructed by special means. For instance, they donned fortifying jackets, masks, charms, and amulets made of severed body parts.⁶ Less traditional fighters, such as the RUF, imitated these practices in an ad hoc manner, with concocted spiritual authorities and exaggerated ritual expressions, and also enlisted mercenaries known for similar spiritual prowess and traditional means of acquiring it. While the violence in these practices was not ignored by practitioners, it was subsumed within strategies of immunization against wounds and of fortifica-

⁶On the charms and special clothing, see Ferme (2001), Ellis (1995) and Richards (2009). On the cannibalism, Włodarczyk points out that, as an ingestive means for acquiring power, cannibalism has a legacy in the region (e.g., 2009, 38).

tion of defensive powers: successful initiands were thought to repel bullets and to defy gravity. As Włodarczyk notes, such strategies were persuasive on the battlefield. Not only the practices but rumors of the practices intimidated opponents, and thus resulted in concrete effects (2009, 83–91). This example speaks to the way that violence, if acknowledged at all, tends to resonate in terms constrained by tradition.

Mbembé notes that some African wars after colonialism reflect the harnessing of local practices as ways of reenchanting tradition and shaping identity (2002, 267). We can see this in wartime practices of ritual, self-decorating (specifically scarification), and also music. A sensational example of the first is the century-old means of releasing the blocked flow (of *imaana* spiritual liquid, essential for the community's well-being) that Taylor identified in the hacking choreography among the Hutu Interahamwe militia during the Rwandan war of 1994. Traditionally, *imaana* emanated from the king's body and homologously on the land, but when blocked was said to be released by bloodletting rituals at auspicious boundaries. According to Taylor, Interahamwe youths replicated these bloodletting rituals by symbolically charged acts of bodily torture to Tutsis, their cattle, and Tutsi-aligned Hutus, also at auspicious boundaries (1999). This is an extraordinary example of reinvigorating but surely also perverting tradition.

As for ritualized scarification, one recent example can be seen among the MaiMai in the eastern region of DR Congo. Historically MaiMai are an ethnically and geographically shifting group who practiced rituals identifiably a century old (Jourdan 2011), but in the 1990s the so-named group were comprised primarily of youths engaged in civil war. Very young *docteurs* would sprinkle maji-maji (waters mixed with special herbs and reputedly bodily ashes) on ritually inflicted cuts to scarify the initiated and to make them resilient to harm. A fairly elaborate code of behavioral restrictions—e.g., abstaining from sexual intercourse, from looking at blood, from washing with soap, from eating cooked manioc—also were to ward off death.⁷ It may seem astonishing that these practices emerged in new configurations during the 1990s, but less astonishing when one considers them reenchantments of tradition at a time of crisis.

As for music, it has always shaped identity, of course, and musical seduction may not seem like a reinvigorated tradition. Nonetheless we have some well-studied instances of its deliberate manipulation to create identity in the face of conflict. Richards notes the attempt by RUF abductors to indoctrinate their abductees (many of them children) in Sierra Leone through collective

⁷Many of the rules were in fact broken, particularly the rule against rape (Kelly 2010).

song. In his view, musical performance, as unassigned intentionality, engages singers with rhythm and melody and is conducive to shaping a common identity, regardless of whether the singer is knowingly committed to any ideology espoused in song (2007, 76).⁸ In the 1990s Hutu context, there was ostensibly explicit and sinister ideological suasion in Simon Bikindi’s hate-songs, which earned him an ICTR conviction for his musical role in inciting Rwandan genocide. Staged in military and traditional dress and widely played on local media, his performances—rhythmic exhortations to kill⁹—ostensibly animated the Interahamwe youths’ killing sprees against Tutsis and other opponents.¹⁰ Notably, music has been used to healing effect in the wake of the very same conflict.

Lest these wartime incidents appear entirely outside the loop of Christianity and Islam, it should be pointed out that they all were informed by Christian or Muslim symbologies too. Religious symbols were woven not just into war but into its aftermath. One interesting case from the 1990s is the culturally traumatized DRC city of Kinshasa, where the biblical book of Revelation, promoted by Jehovah’s Witnesses, loomed large. War and other afflictions had reduced Kinois society to a “realm of indistinction” (Mbembé’s term [2002, 267]), where the frontiers between law and chaos dissolved, life and death became arbitrary, and the spread of terror, torture, mutilation, and mass killings burst apart familiar frames of reference. In the Congolese imaginary, death from HIV/AIDS, from civil wars, from spillover wars from neighboring states and ethnic disputes, and from starvation and social chaos, generated both a real and also an imagined necropolis, as parallel worlds. Cemetery space was contested, graves were violated, ghosts filled churches and nightclubs, and killing methods—not just by machete and bayonet but by “necklacing”—were fetishized (De Boeck 2005). In the face of all this cultural disintegration, a combination of music, art, the evangelical church, and millennial hopes created what De Boeck calls an “apocalyptic interlude” (2005, 25), in which visions of end times hovered just ahead or just behind that point in time. The biblical book of Revelation became an omnipresent frame of reference in Kinshasa; the world was either about to slip into the grip of Satan or was already in it. De Boeck shows how war, starvation, loot-

⁸Richards points out that the children’s responses were uneven—as might be said of singing by troops during any war. E.g., Lili Marlene among German forces and Bella Ciao among the Italian partisans in WWII.

⁹<http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/index.php?i=15096&a=2490>.

¹⁰A number of anthropologists have noted that adolescents are particularly primed for musical and ritual seduction (e.g., Alcorta and Sosis 2005, 2013). Bikindi’s musical coercion among this demographic was recognized by his prosecutors.

ing, and social breakdown—very real threats to life—were deeply tied to a biblical vision of either imminent disaster or dystopian ennui.

In conclusion, the preceding observations are intended to show the risk of imposing simple categorizations of religion and violence on the cultural mosaic that is Africa. We can explore this mosaic further by a glance at the contributions.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

Our first two contributions address human rights. First, Elias Bongmba discusses “Homosexuality, *Ubuntu*, and Otherness in the African Church.” The African ethical conception of *ubuntu* implies interconnectedness and interdependence of persons, as in the IsiZulu expression, *umuntu untuntu ngabantu*,” “a person is a person because of other people.” In the face of a seemingly pan-African homophobia—support and criminal activities for which Bongmba catalogues in detail—the traditional notion of *ubuntu* is offered as an ethical counter to the vitriol espoused by Africa’s Anglican and Evangelical Churches against LGBT persons. *Ubuntu* is shown to coincide with Gospel exhortations to the golden rule as well as with the Levinian concept of “face.”

Next Mary Nyangweso, in “Negotiating Cultural Rights to Affirm Human Rights,” discusses the persistent African practice of female genital cutting. Her treatment is thorough. Nyangweso shows the variety of religious rationales for the practice, and in some cases the religious merit reputedly accrued by it, as well as its linkage with overt forms of female oppression, such as child marriage and the gifting of widows to new husbands. Despite some of the personal deprivations associated with female genital cutting, particularly in the sphere of female pleasure, she fairly acknowledges counter arguments to the effect that many circumcised women are able to lead fulfilling sex lives. Most importantly, however, while recognizing the appeal of tradition, Nyangweso points out that, embraced for its own sake, tradition can be staid and despotic. Rejecting the binary of cultural tradition versus human rights, she endorses the concept of intersectionality, whereby transfixed cultural boundaries are shown to be in fact ambiguous over time and whereby religious values that affirm human rights can promote cross cultural understandings that are respectful to all humans.

Following these, we focus on specific regions. First, Palwasha Kakar and Melissa Nozell, from the United States Institute of Peace, outline the religious make-up and history of Libyan society and conflict. Today Libya sits at an interface of myriad competing Islamic trends: Sufis, Salafis, Centrists, Muslim Brotherhood, Takfiris, and Jihadis of various stripes. The authors engage a

number of representatives in the region to show how, although these factions have been influential in the region for differing periods of time, they all compete for influence on political discourse. Even the Sufis have a history of engaging injustice in the region.¹¹ The authors argue that multiple lines of religious, tribal, geographic, political, and economic influence must be addressed in order for Libya to transition from a region of strife to region of peace.

Second is an essay by Ian Linden, Senior Advisor for the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, with Thomas Thorpe. Linden and Thorpe argue for the home-grown nature of Nigeria’s religious tensions. Roughly equal parts Christian and Muslim, the population has suffered extreme turmoil over the last few decades, but the seeds for this conceivably date back some two centuries. British-borne Christianity entered the region then and encountered Islamic traditions dating back to the eleventh century. In chronicling the different strains of Islam growing in African soil as they interacted with British colonial influences and were set against and within preexisting ethnic identities, Linden and Thorpe trace the economic, social, as well as religious nature of Nigerian conflicts, which seem to have grown more heated in the last half century. This is not in small part because historically Muslim regions now face intense Pentecostal missionizing, but other factors are rooted in material realities, such as oil wealth. Peace-making is not a new effort in the region, but the Blair foundation is held up as potentially forging compassionate links among different religious leaders and communities.

We hope that these essays will intrigue our readers and stimulate further interest in African traditions.

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¹¹Manuela Ceballos has observed this legacy of Sufi activism in North Africa (2014).

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