

# Challenges for the sociology of religion in the African context

prospects for the next fifty years<sup>1</sup>

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## **INTRODUCTORY SUMMARY**

At the request of *Social Compass*, on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary as a leading journal for the sociology of religion, I was asked to define the challenges which the sociology of religion will face in the African context over the next fifty years. After retrospectively sketching both the African situation (with its three pillars of historic African religion, Islam, and Christianity) and some Africanist themes in the sociology of religion, globalisation is discussed as the first challenge: how does it affect religion and identity, and how does the model of the formal (self-) organisation which it favours, have an impact especially with regard to representation and resilience of African religious forms. The next major challenge clusters around the problematic state of civil society in Africa: in the face of disorder and violent conflict, can African religious forms contribute to the societal consensus that is central to modern statehood? The third challenge is situated in the spatial and temporal framework for the sociology of religion in Africa, which should be neither presentist, nor confined to the African continent as a recent geopolitical construct. Finally an attempt is made to identify a major challenge underlying the social and political performance of religion in Africa: the fundamental immanentalism of African traditions of thought.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Françoise Gendebien and Michael Singleton, for their invitation; and to Ella Verkaik and her colleagues in the Library and Documentation Department, African Studies Centre, Leiden, for invaluable bibliographical contributions. The impossible project indicated by the title was imposed upon me by *Social Compass* and reflects no ambition of my own.

## **NO PROSPECT WITHOUT RETROSPECT**

The sociology of religion in Africa has been only sparingly represented at the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR)'s conferences and the journal *Social Compass*. Attending the conference sessions on the North Atlantic region and selected other parts of the world made me realise how very different from those colleagues' research experiences the study of religion in Africa has tended to be.

In terms of the central theories and debates informing religious sociological research, the theoretical continuity vis-à-vis the founding fathers of the sociology of religion (Durkheim, Marx, Troeltsch, Weber), and of sociology *tout court*, is far more apparent in North Atlantic studies than with regard to Africa. The main reason for this is social continuity. The urban, industrial class society; the formal organisation as that society's main social technology – especially in the religious field; the self-evidence of the capitalist economy in league with an effective bureaucratically organised state; and the high extent to which citizens (through formal education and other state-supervised experiences) entertain a societal consensus in which the rationality of the state and of the economy appear to them as virtually inescapable – this was more or less the format of North Atlantic societies when the sociology of religion emerged from their midst a century ago, and whatever massive changes have since taken place, that format can still be made out, especially from the contrastive, distant perspective which contemporary Africa affords us. Thus the North Atlantic sociologist of religion derives confidence from the fact that the phenomena under investigation are continuous with that investigator's native social experience, and have greatly inspired his discipline from its inception.

In Africa, however, the generally recent (19th-20th century CE), incomplete, ineffective, and by now eroded (Davidson 1992; Mbembe 2001), implantation of the North Atlantic model of state and society has meant, for much of the 20th century, that the Africanist sociologist of religion is on relatively unfamiliar grounds, facing a plurality of highly fragmented and historically heterogeneous forms of ritual practice which have resulted in only a precarious, partial and (to judge by the level of internal violent conflict) ineffective societal and political consensus; moreover, these forms have been largely studied by other social sciences than the sociology of religion (notably anthropology and history).

Yet, over the past fifty years, the social-scientific study of religion in Africa has grown from a mere trickle to a massive undertaking, now pursuing a variety of paradigms largely unheard of at the beginning of that period. The older studies<sup>2</sup> concentrated on church dynamics; church independency; religious organisation as an urban adaptive mechanism; syncretism (as an unsatisfactory designation of processes of interaction between 'historic'<sup>3</sup> African religion on the one hand, Islam or Christianity on the other); healing cults; prophetic movements largely interpreted as protest against the colonial state; and the parallelism or complementarity between a local society's secular and religious structural and symbolical themes. Studies along such lines have not exactly faded away but they no longer constitute the bulk of Africanist religious studies. Instead, the following themes have come to be prominent: identity; youth; globalisation; intercontinentalisation; commodification; multiplicity of reference; agency; complex interactions between Islam, Christianity and historic African religion;<sup>4</sup> fundamentalism; disorder, violence, human rights, the collapse and – hopefully – subsequent reconstruction of civil society and the state; the environment;

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<sup>2</sup> For general reviews of these older themes, cf. Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger & Weller 1975; Ranger 1986; Hastings 2000; van Binsbergen 1981; van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985.

<sup>3</sup> My preferred euphemism for 'traditional'

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Gnamo 2002; Kilani 2000; Sharkey 2002.

witchcraft and modernity; divination; health implication of religious beliefs and practices; the details of Islamic social and political life in Africa, and its transcontinental connections; representation; and epistemology. Ethnicity, gender, popular culture, territorial cults, royal cults, possession and mediumship, the sacralisation of space, cosmologies, and modes of production linger on from among the themes of the 1970s-1990s.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the African continent itself has moved from relatively effective colonial domination via a period of political and economic euphoria in the first decade of independence (1960s-70s), to economic and political decline in subsequent decades. Over the past fifty years, the trajectories of Islam, Christianity and ‘historic’ African religious forms – the three main pillars of Africanist religious studies – have been very different, and all three of them largely unpredictable. World-wide, the rise of Islam to a spiritual and political power complex of the first magnitude, as well as the relative decline of organised Christianity in the North Atlantic region, have constituted two processes which over the past half century have greatly influenced the dynamics of these world religions *on African soil*, as well as scholars’ perceptions of these dynamics.

*Sociologists* will appreciate that the most powerful and most amazingly successful *social* technology implanted on African soil in the course of twentieth century, has been: the formal, voluntary or bureaucratic organisation as defined along Weberian lines, which (despite all its malfunctioning) yet within a century has almost completely transformed all spheres of African life, from the state to education and health care, and which particularly has come to provide the dominant organisational model of religious self-organisation, among Christian churches, but increasingly also in the Islamic domain and even in the domain of African historic religion.<sup>6</sup>

While the spread of the two world religions to Africa, and their subsequent developments there, in itself has been part of an earlier phase of (proto-)globalisation in the course of the past two millennia, the most recent decades have seen an intensification of globalisation in the narrower sense, governed by technologies of communication and information that have dramatically reduced the social cost of time and space to an unprecedented minimum.

Fifty years ago it would have been absolutely impossible to predict these recent developments with any degree of precision. The visionary mind which would have hinted correctly at them would have been banned from the field of scholarship, to that of science fiction. Proposing prospects for the next half century is not any simpler, for there is no reason to assume that the pace of religious, social, political and technological change in the world is slackening now that mankind has managed to survive, barely, into the twenty-first century.

However, in religious studies we are familiar with a particular *kind* of fools that is most relevant in the present context: *prophets*, who legitimate their pronouncements by claiming that they ‘speak on behalf of’ the divine (as is the etymology of the word *prophet* in ancient Greek). Such prophets’ *sociological* significance<sup>7</sup> is that, in their personal life, they have internalised and grappled with the central contradictions of their time and age in such a way that the pronouncements they make on that basis resonate profoundly with many of their fellow-members of society, organising the latter’s experience and granting it a genuinely new, revelatory meaning. If I may be permitted to interpret my present role in such a secularly prophetic sense, my reading of such challenges as the Africanist sociology of religion presents, may not attract a large following (but what prophet is honoured in his own country,

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bediako 2000; Bureau 2002; van Dijk & Pels 1996; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993.

<sup>6</sup> For Islam, cf. Renders 2002; Salih 2002. For African historic religion, see below.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 1981: ch. 4; Dozon 1995; Tonda & Gruénais 2000; Jones 2002.

anyway?), but may at least ring a bell – to stay with ecclesiastical imagery so abundant in this field.

## **THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALISATION IN THE AFRICAN RELIGIOUS CONTEXT**

### **How globalisation affects religion**

Recent globalisation has by and large resulted in a blurring of the above ideal-typical difference between Africa and the North Atlantic region. Under postmodern conditions typical of globalisation, North Atlantic societies, too, have experienced large-scale erosion of meaning and consensus, fragmentation of identity, and erosion of the nation-state by elusive intercontinental corporate powers in the economic domain. In Africa, the percolation of global *linguae francae*, of global media such as television, the cell phone, and the Internet, of globally circulating manufactured consumer goods, and of globally available religious expressions such as Islamism and Pentecostalism, have brought the forms of African social and religious life closer to those in other continents today. Increasingly also for Africa and for an increasing number of Africans, the neat compartmentalisation of the world into sharply demarcated continents has become an idea of the past. Not only have the concerns of North Atlantic political, ideological and economic hegemony and of Islamic counter-hegemony found their way to what used to be distinct and distant local settings in Africa. Also the religious, ethnic and cultural expressions which used to be restricted to local settings in Africa, in the course of recent globalisation have spilled over to Africans' diasporic communities world-wide. Recent technologies make it possible for local African religious and artistic expressions to assume a new global and commodified format; this offers them a new lease of life albeit that in the process they have become greatly transformed, shedding much of their original local symbolic frame of reference. For the first time in post-Neolithic history distinctive local and regional African religious expressions (music, dance, divination, specific cults, more diffuse personal spirituality – cf. Olupona 2000) have gained a substantial presence and impact in the North Atlantic *also among people not of recent conscious African descent*. The latter effect is caused both by the increasingly diasporic demographic presence of Africans, and by their appropriation of recent communication technologies also for the expression of local (and not just global) religious ideas and practices. This effect in the religious domain has however been amply foreshadowed: for decades, in the adoption of transformed African expressive culture (cf. jazz, popular music) into secular popular culture throughout the Americas and Europe; and even for several centuries in the Americas, among people of (partial) African descent – both processes as a result of forced transcontinental migration: the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a form of proto-globalisation.

If the decline of organised religion in the North Atlantic goes hand in hand with the destruction of socially underpinned, collectively shared meaning, could it then be that the resilience and continued flourishing of religion in Africa has implications, not only for the African continent but world-wide? Already we have had, for decades, a situation where Africa is the major growth area of both Christianity and Islam; African religious personnel has been known to be subjected to a brain-drain, with, for instance, African parish priests filling some of the open ranks in the North Atlantic Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy. However, it is not only established, organised religion which is fed back from Africa into the North Atlantic region, but also diffuse notions of magic and evil, for instance around the concept of 'voodoo', which has become detached from any original meaning and content it had in the

original context (in *vodun* in Benin/Togo/Nigeria), and now has become a blanket term in global circulation, to denote any African spiritual force murkily defying global rationality (cf. van Dijk et al. 2000; van Dijk 2001).

Christianity and Islam have been among the most significant globalising projects ever since the era of proto-globalisation, and it therefore stands to reason that religions have loomed large in globalisation studies from the very beginning.<sup>8</sup> Here the standard was set by Ranger (1993, cf. 1975!). Recent work on Pentecostalism puts the Christian side of globalisation in Africa in relief.

A series of articles recently edited by Corten & Marshall-Fratani (2001) deals specifically with the issues of global flows, migration and nationalism in relation to Pentecostalism. The editors note that over the past two decades, Latin American and African societies have experienced a phenomenal growth of Pentecostal movements. Describing a 'bricolage' of extremely heterogeneous elements, the editors argue that contemporary Pentecostalism provides a striking example of the paradox of difference and uniformity, of flow and closure, that seems to be at the heart of processes of transnationalism and globalisation. The dazzling complexity and (class-wise) social diversity of the Pentecostal phenomenon in Africa, and its globalisation overtones, are well captured in this volume.

On the Islamic side, Kane (1997) examines the historical role and structure of Sufi orders in West Africa. In the context defined by globalisation, the breakdown of the state, and mass migrations, Kane argues that the networks which Sufi orders create, function in fact as a substitute to the state in the providing of social security. With increased mobility, the Sufi networks have now been strengthened over ever greater distances, often well beyond Africa. Parallels to Kane's work are to be found in the work of Stoller (1999, 2002), and Dilley (in press).

However, globalisation has also had an impact on historic African religion. Much research has concentrated on the collective imagination, the fantasies, which globalisation brings about especially in the periphery of the global system. Economically and socially marginalized,

'thrown out of the circle of full humanity' (Ferguson 1999: 236),

Africans have developed strands of reasoning that seek to explain and provide solutions to this exclusion. They have come up with explanations of the world which to outside observers may appear to be absurd, fantastic, and beyond the bounds of the rational. Such ideas and explanations had seemingly withered and disappeared in Europe in post-Enlightenment times. However, it is worth remembering that the European past and present provides a rich corpus seeking to identify and to control this fantastic world.<sup>9</sup>

Research conducted on the issues of witchcraft and magic in Africa in the context of globalisation has come to be dominated by the work of Geschiere.<sup>10</sup> For Geschiere, the obsession with witchcraft in many parts of present-day Africa is not to be viewed as a survival, as some sort of traditional residue. On the contrary, it is particularly present in the more modern spheres of society. Geschiere notes that also in other parts of the world modern developments coincide with a proliferation of 'economies of the occult' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). The power of contemporary African discourses on occult forces, according to Geschiere, is that they relate people's fascination with the open-endedness of global flows

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<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to my colleagues Rijk van Dijk and Jan-Bart Gewald for allowing me to use here material from van Binsbergen *et al.* in press.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., from among a very extensive literature, Thorndike 1923-1958; Ginzburg 1966, 1989; Thomas 1978; Clough & Mitchell 2001; Ellis 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Geschiere 1995, 1998; cf. Taussig 1980; Bongmba 2001; Bond & Ciekawi 2001.

to the search for fixed orientation points and identities. Both witchcraft and spirit cults exhibit a surprising capacity for combining the local and the global. Both also have specific implications for the ways in which people try to deal with modernity's challenge.

Writing of commodities in the global space, van Dijk (1999: 72) challenges the common 'enchantment' approach to this topic, because it :

'seems to primitivize the other's capacity to deal with the uncertainties and the porous quality of social life which result from engagement with the global economy'.

Personally, I have sought to correct Geschiere's presentism, advocating instead that witchcraft in Africa today is about the 'virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order' – an order whose basic format at least goes back to the Neolithic, as does its basic defiance through witchcraft, even though under modern conditions of globalisation the specific forms and occasions of witchcraft beliefs and practices have been subject to specific changes (van Binsbergen 2001a).

## The challenge of identity

The recent globalisation process, with its profound changes in the nature of post-capitalism and the North Atlantic state, has led, throughout the world today, to a situation where (superimposed upon a structure of world-wide inequality along continental, national-constitutional, regional, class, gender and age lines, and largely obscuring the latter from view) there is a representational structure of *identity*. From the local to the global level, politics is less and less conceived as a struggle for scarce material resources, but as a struggle for recognition of identity (Taylor 1992) – which, if successful, will imply access to the underlying structure of scarce resources anyway. By the same token, *denial* of identity is increasingly seen as the most brutal act of exclusion. Religious forms, in Africa and elsewhere, have lend themselves for the production of contrastive identities within the socio-political arenas at all levels. They have (often as a result of the local historical contingencies of Christian and Islamic proselytising in Africa) either reinforced existing ethnic, linguistic, regional and class boundaries, or offered alternative (usually more universal) identities in the light of which non-religious identity boundaries can be crossed or rendered irrelevant. Empirical studies exploring these processes have formed an established genre of Africanist religious research for decades.

*Challenges* arise here in a number of ways.

The *first* challenge concerns what has emerged as a major paradigm in the interpretation of organised religion in the postmodern North Atlantic region: *believing without belonging* (cf. Davie 1996): the dissociation between adherence to a set of beliefs, on the one hand, and involvement in a voluntary formal organisation propounding such beliefs, on the other hand. In Africa, it is very much still 'believing *and* belonging', in the sense that especially in Christianity (but increasingly also in Islam and even in African historic religion) formal self-organisation is the obvious context for belief and ritual.

In the *second* place we have to consider the proliferation of new boundaries and new identities under the very impact of globalisation – contrary to the naive expectation that globalisation is all about unimpeded flow. Political processes, especially those of an imperial nature, have carved out geographical spaces within which a plurality of identities tend to be mapped out. An unstructured, diffuse social field cannot be named nor can it inspire identity. The apparently unlimited and uncontrollable supply of intercontinentally mediated images, symbols, ideas and objects which is swept across contemporary Africa by the media, commodity distribution, the educational services, cosmopolitan medicine and world religions, calls for new identities. People seek to define new boundaries so as to create or salvage their

identity in the face of this incessant flow. By imposing boundaries they may either appropriate for themselves a specific part of the global supply, or protect themselves in order to keep part of the global flow at a safe distance. Such boundaries are in the first place constructed by human thought, as *conceptual* boundaries. However, they are mainly maintained and ever again re-constructed, in *interaction*; and for such interaction the relatively new formal organisations of Africa constitute the most obvious context. Let us for instance consider such a widespread phenomenon as the laundering of globally mediated commodities and of money in the context of contemporary religious organisations. We have seen how many African Christian churches appear as a context for the managing of elements belonging to the inimical domain of commodities, consumption and the market. But much the same process is at work among syncretistic or neo-traditional cults.<sup>11</sup> If such organisations can selectively manage the global and construct a security screen of identity around their members, they are at least as effective in keeping the local (ancestors, spirits of the wild, local deities) out of their charmed circle of identity, or allowing it in only at severe restrictions. There is a remarkable variation in the way in which local religious forms are allowed to be voiced in a context where the globally mediated religious forms (Islam, Christianity) are clearly dominant. Creating identity – ‘a place to feel at home’, to borrow Welbourn & Ogot’s apt expression first applied to Independent churches in Western Kenya, – means that the Christian or Islamic converts engage in a social process that allows them, by the management of boundaries and the positioning of people, ideas and objects within and outside these boundaries, to create a new community which, in principle, is independent from whatever pre-existing community attachments they may have had on the basis of their kinship affiliations, rural homes, ethnic or political affiliations.

This second point implies the *third*, which has been elaborated by the cosmopolitan African philosophers Mudimbe (1988) and Appiah (1992) in their critique of Afrocentricity<sup>12</sup> and ethnic identity politics; these philosophers are claiming that African identities today, including religious identities, are so unmistakably and deceptively constructed that, rather than take them seriously, we should only deconstruct them.

In an Africa rife with the reification of, and conflict over, identities, such a theoretical *caveat* is likely to have less practical implications than a *fourth* type of challenge in the domain of identity. This arises when local and global identities percolate and merge to form a tangle with far-reaching political implications. For instance, the identity constructions of Igbo immigrants in Hausaland, Northern Nigeria (notably: ‘will they convert to Islam or not?’), are no longer primarily determined by a consideration of the networks of local and regional trade and other economic opportunities, but by the Islamist attacks on the eastern USA on 9 September 2001, and their aftermath. Whereas assuming a Christian identity (although perceived as a path to modernity) was rarely a sufficient condition for an African person’s acceptance in North Atlantic circles, possessing or assuming of an *Islamic* identity now in principle incriminates the same African person by virtue of the deceptive construction, by American-British hegemony, of a collective enemy of the North Atlantic political and economic order and security. Of course, the expansion of Christianity in Africa has been part of a North Atlantic hegemonic project from the nineteenth century CE onwards, and in this sense the recent projection of extra-African concerns on African processes of identity is nothing new under the sun. We should resist the temptation of turning Africanist religious

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. in an urban variety of *sangoma* mediumistic cults widespread in Southern Africa (van Binsbergen 1999, 2003b).

<sup>12</sup> Seminal Afrocentrist writings include: Diop 1955; Asante 1987. For well-documented but largely dismissive critical assessments, cf. Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* 2000, English translation in preparation; Howe 1999; for a view opposing Howe and defending Afrocentrism in academia, cf. van Binsbergen 2000d.

studies into a hegemonic exercise puppeteered from the Foreign Offices in Washington and London.<sup>13</sup> Instead, we should try to find a sociological answer to the question – no longer particularly Africanist – as to why Islam has such a massive and increasing appeal in Africa today.<sup>14</sup> Islam appears as an alternative route to modernity, ensuring (or at least promising) a meaningfulness, dignity, boundedness, and (as a stepping stone to Islamic diasporas in the North Atlantic region) world-wide *belonging*, which Northern hegemony denies the vast majority of the inhabitants of Asia, Africa and Southern America. It may be time to break out of our decades-long fascination with identity for identity's sake, and re-address ourselves to the study of underlying *inequalities in resources and power*.

### **The challenge of formalisation, representation, and resilience**

The increasing dominance of formal organisations after the North Atlantic model has inevitably an impact on the representation of African religious forms. The insistence on formal (self-)organisations in the religious domain offers the possibilities of firm boundaries, as stipulated by the socio-legal format of such organisations, their registration with the state, and their clear distinction between who is a member and who is not.

However, the plurality of religious organisations in contemporary Africa should not make us close our eyes to the fact that in social practice the boundaries between them tend to be very porous: people shop around for religious affiliation, many have multiple memberships or at least affinities, and in practice one easily shifts from one organisation to another for reasons of convenience, sociability, existential appeal, more than of doctrine.

Representation is an ubiquitous feature, even a precondition, of social life. The very perpetuation of religious forms even in the hands of their own qualified adepts depends on representation, which enables these participants to coordinate the social process of their ritual organisation, to recruit and instruct newcomers, and to present themselves both self-reflectively and towards the outside world.

From the introduction of writing to that of the Internet, technological innovations have revolutionarised the domain of self-presentation of African religious forms: from self-reflexive ethnography (introduced already a century ago, when early Kongo converts began to produce written texts describing their traditional religion – cf. Janzen 1985); subsequently raised to the genre of 'retrodiction' ('evoking historic African religion as if one still believed in them') which Mudimbe (1997) has so aptly identified for the Roman Catholic clerical intellectuals living the articulation of difference in late colonial Central Africa; to self-representation through photographs, film, video, and especially on globally available websites today. Adopting a new technology of representation also means making aspects of African religion available for circulation and appropriation outside Africa, even among non-Africans.

Africanist religious studies are also a form of representation (cf. Leland Cox 2001): the *etic* translation of *emic* local concepts,<sup>15</sup> activities and structures of social relations, towards the alien language of social and cultural analytical description after the evolving paradigms of North Atlantic scholarship. Here the classic empirical naivety ('if we carefully use the right methods, we will arrive at a faithful representation African religious forms') has gradually been supplanted by an ever increasing awareness of *the violence of representation* (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b). This insight has made us aware that African religious forms (e.g. a serenely propitiatory African ancestral ritual; an African Independent Church hymn sung

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<sup>13</sup> Pace Akhahenda 2002; Center 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Belmessous 2002; Jhazbhay 2002; Mumisa 2002; Omar 2002.

<sup>15</sup> On the paired concepts *emic* and *etic*, cf. Headland et al. 1990.

passionately; a profound Islamic lecture on the meaning of a particular Qur'anic passage) – that these cannot possibly be rendered in scholarly texts without violence to the original. The representation exists on a different plane from the original, yet it is circulated in the wider world of national and intercontinental power relations as if it were a faithful replica of the original. Such academic representation of African religious forms can however be made less violent if it actively, in a dialogical form, seeks to accommodate such *emic* forms of representation as the participants themselves engage in, *and* if the products of representation (in the form of published sociological studies) are subsequently made available to the participants for appropriation and criticism. But once we try to do this, we hit upon the epistemological challenge that divides the believers from the (typically non-believing) analytical describers, and that unjustifiably privileges the latter as if African religion is only there to be deconstructed as illusory. (cf. van Binsbergen 1991, 1999, 2001b, and 2003b).

The reformulation in a new organisational format is a major reason why, over the past decades, *African historic religious forms* have displayed a far greater resilience than could ever have been predicted considering the onslaught of North Atlantic secular rationality, the state, Christianity, Islam, and biomedicine. For such major domains as territorial cults,<sup>16</sup> puberty rites, chieftainship<sup>17</sup> (which throughout Africa involves royal cults), possession and mediumship,<sup>18</sup> and divination<sup>19</sup> there is considerable evidence to the effect that, far from disappearing under modern conditions, these have made a remarkable comeback in the late twentieth century. North Atlantic research on these topics has not produced this resilience, but merely recorded it and identified its probable causes. The available studies suggests two other factors of resilience in addition to their reformulation within formal organisations:

1. These institutions are time-honoured ways, of proved effectiveness, to deal with perpetual central issues facing local societies (authority, order, the management of conflict, role preparation, gender and age differences, the acquisition of an effective social identity);
2. These institutions draw on sources of cosmological meaning and self-identity whose continued relevance that may have been eroded by recent globalisation, yet were far from destroyed by it.

Examples abound. In contemporary western Zambia, various historic religious forms survive under the aegis of the Kazanga Cultural Society, which is formally registered under the Societies Act, and whose urban executive manage to articulate, in the context of an annual festival, the cults and traditional leaders in the countryside to high-ranking national politicians from the capital (van Binsbergen 1994a). By the same token, in contemporary Botswana the Mwali high-god cult and the divinatory and healing activities of traditional practitioners have come to articulate themselves organisationally towards the state and the wider public under the guise of formal organisations under the Societies Act; this strategy leaves the activities and power relations of their senior personnel intact, while expanding their scope to accumulate and manage modern resources such as real estate, motor vehicles, retail businesses etc. (van Binsbergen 1993a). Among middle-class urban Zambians, female puberty rites survive and are increasingly popular partly because of the recent reformulation in the form of 'kitchen parties' celebrating a young woman's attainment of nubile adulthood by a festive shower of modern kitchen utensils and other household gear; the modern format,

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Werbner 1977, Schoffeleers 1979; Flynn 2002; Greene 2002; Sheridan 2000; Wamue 2001; Gadou 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & van Dijk 1999; van Binsbergen 2003a; Ballarin 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Dupré 2001; Fiorelli 2000; van Dijk et al. 2000; Wastiau 2000; van Binsbergen, 2003b.

<sup>19</sup> van Binsbergen 2003b, and in press; Hammond-Tooke 2002; Teixeira 2001; Pemberton 2000.

informed by world-wide models (especially from North America) helps to lend respectability and continuity to what is still in essence a time-honoured puberty rite.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the most obvious context for the resilience of historic African religion is provided by formal organisations in the context of the world religions: Christian churches,<sup>21</sup> Islamic brotherhoods and mosque-centred congregations. However, we have already pointed out that these organisations' adoption of historic elements is highly selective and transformative, generally reducing such elements to a muted and implicit state in which they have become deprived of dynamics of their own.

## ***THE CHALLENGE OF DISORDER, CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE – RELIGION AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT***

Religious forms in Africa either reinforce or cut across existing socio-political, ethnic, regional, class, age and gender identities and their boundaries. Therefore, whenever we encounter religious processes in Africa (be they in the Islamic, Christian or historic African domain) conflict is always within our field of vision, and violence is never far away.

The empirical documentation of the varieties of violence<sup>22</sup> and their religion-related contexts constitutes a meaningful and urgent field of research, not only from an analytical but also from a humanitarian point of view. Postcolonial African states have often failed to extend economic and physical security to their citizens, and in about a dozen African countries the state only exist on paper any more. This has had a profound impact on the religious domain: established forms of religious self-organisation come under pressure, or may even collapse; there is a resilience of other forms (especially historic ones) and their mobilisation for survival, protest, and liberation; world religions' intercontinental connections are used to create contexts of negotiation and reconciliation to reduce or terminate conflict, and to further democracy; political, regional and ethnic conflict may be articulated in terms two rival world religions, (Islam versus Christianity), sometimes as an invitation to massive violence.

The challenge here lies particularly in the formulation of more adequate models of social analysis. A powerful tradition in the sociology of religion (that of Durkheim 1912) puts religion at the centre of the construction of the social order, and hence lets religion appear as a context in which conflict is attenuated and reconciliation may be negotiated in avoidance of violence. This approach has proved reasonably enlightening for socio-political processes at the grassroots level of the village, the localised ethnic group in a rural setting, and the urban ward. Here the participants' dominant frame of reference tends to be modelled after kinship, and religious groups with their rituals enhance the intra-kin social process or provide the alternative of fictive kinship. Religious institutions in Africa (Islamic, Christian, and historic African) tend to offer highly effective social technologies of reconciliation at the local level (van Binsbergen 1999). However, at the regional and national level, and in the light of world-wide processes leading to the negative stereotyping of Islam in untutored North Atlantic eyes, religion has proved to be more a divisive than an integrative force in Africa. All the same, religious organisations, both Africa-based and international, have been active in reconciliation with regard to recent ethnic and racial conflict in, for instance, East Africa and the Republic of South Africa (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission).

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Rasing 1995, 2001; van Binsbergen 1998

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Adogame 2000; Olajubu 2001; Werbner 1985; van Binsbergen 2000b

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Marlin 2001; Cooper 2002; Devisch 1995; Konings et al. 2000.

A central challenge, therefore, inspired by the performance of African religious forms in the social and political domain, is: *can African religion contribute to the construction of societal consensus as the backbone of civil society?* Can the two world religions, each separately or in combination, ever succeed in binding the extreme fragmentation of African religious experience into a consensus at the regional, national, even international level?

In principle, the answer on this point is rather affirmative despite (cf. Mbembe 1997) far-reaching qualifications. In addition to the adoption of the formal organisation, and closely related to this process, the transformation of African societies in the course of the twentieth century has consisted of the creation of a new, national societal order, and the religious underpinning of that order by elements derived from a world religion. In the northern half of Africa, where Islam has often been dominant since well *before* the advent of European colonial rule, this process evolved more gradually than where (very roughly: in Africa south of the 10° North parallel) Christianity emerged as the main world religion in question (although, more recently, under pressure from a rapidly increasing Islam). In Islamic Africa the process subsequently intensified with the global rise of Islamism in the last decades of the twentieth century. As far as Christianity is concerned, one can hardly overestimate the rapidity and the force with which this world religion, so closely associated with the colonial state, modern education and health care, in much less than a century managed to establish itself as an implicit 'Great Tradition', not so much eradicating historic African religion but relegating it to the rural and the private sphere, as an unobtrusively surviving, often even resilient, 'Little Tradition'.

Although there are notable exceptions (e.g. Benin and Swaziland, where historic ecstatic and royal cults are frequently mediated towards the public sphere and the centres of national power), by and large, in contemporary Africa, historic African religion tends to be inconspicuous. While surviving as a private expression in the kinship domain and as a local public expression in many rural contexts, it is as a rule not conspicuous in the urban areas and at the political centre. This does not mean that African historic religion is absent from modern life, but that it has largely gone *underground* (cf. van Binsbergen 1993b, 2002), since its numerous private adherents are generally unwilling or incapable to publicly withstand the allegations of primitiveness, heterodoxy, evil, which has been projected upon these local religions expressions ever since the introduction, on African soil, of Islam and Christianity. It is these two world religions which dominate the public sphere and which may, and often do, offer such (admittedly limited) ideological consensus as national African societies yet display in the postcolonial era. Historic African religion yet plays a role there in a number of ways. It may be explicitly co-opted (albeit in a form which has lost its dynamics and meaning) to the public centre, at selected places and times (e.g. Independence celebrations and other political ceremonial) to help construct a sense of national identity through folklore. It may be nostalgically re-invented (cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) not so much by politicians but by intellectuals, in order to derive, from the realm of ancestors and precolonial kingship, alternative solutions for contradictions which the world religions, given their strong links with the political centre, cannot in themselves reconcile – such as in the case of *ubuntu* philosophy in Southern Africa today (van Binsbergen 2002 and references cited there). However, historic African religion is mainly articulated in the public and central sphere in order to provide a *contrast* with the norms and values claimed to inform that sphere. When this happens, African historic religion appears in a negative light – as witchcraft, Satanism, human sacrifice, paganism. This state of affairs may also lead to a point where antisocial violence assumes the trappings of a cult of evil re-invented on the basis of the selective appropriation of elements of African historic religion devoid of their original context (Toulabor 2000). By contrast, when civil war confronts what is seen as an exploitative national or colonial state associated with a world religion, more intact and original forms of African historic religion may be adopted as

important props of identity (e.g. in Southern Senegal, the Zimbabwe liberation struggle).<sup>23</sup>

Comparison with the situation in other continents (most nation-states in the Americas, Europe, North Africa and the Middle East) suggests that when one world religion effectively dominates the national political space this may create the kind of societal consensus conducive to a viable national polity. The presence of competing world religions of comparable strength within a national space often goes together with violent conflict, like in India (Hindus/Muslims) and the Balkan (Christians/Muslims) – and the same may be said about denominations of world religions, like Protestantism/Anglicanism in Northern Ireland, the religious wars in early modern Europe, and the struggles between *sunna* and *shi'ite* Islam in Iraq. In Africa, some major violent conflicts have been fought in postcolonial states comprising rival Muslim and Christian populations (Sudan, Chad, Nigeria in the Biafra crisis). However, one needs only consider the many postcolonial African cases regional and ethnic conflict without a major component of world-religion rivalry (e.g. Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea) to realise, for Africa and beyond, the one-sidedness of Huntington's (1996) stress on world religions in the 'Clash of Civilizations'. Not any allegedly irreconcilable contradiction of world religions, but other features of the postcolonial African states (personalised leadership, shallow constitutional tradition, prominence of ethnic and regional conflict, elite appropriation of the state and its international relations), of their national economies and of their global political and economic environment would explain such conflicts

With the continued decline of African postcolonial states, the world religions tend to provide the organisational backbone of civil society as well as its mouthpiece. This implies that they are in a highly strategic position to mediate between Africa, on the one hand, and the North Atlantic and Middle Eastern political and religious organisations active in the fields of development cooperation, education, and human rights. The role of Christian and Islamic organisations in the democratisation wave and the call for 'good governance' which swept across Africa around 1990, shows the advantages of such a situation. However, its implication is a further marginalisation of historic African religion from the public domain and the political centre; also the filtering of North-South contacts via a local African, religiously-underpinned development elite contains the risk that the local grassroots level no longer actively participates in the intercontinental production and circulation of knowledge, which then tends to become a circulation of ignorance under what I have elsewhere described as the Janus effect (van Binsbergen 1999c).

*Revelation and Revolution*, the Comaroffs' (1991-1997) monumental historicising sociological study of Tswana Christianity in Southern Africa, may leave the superficial reader with the impression that the implantation of a world religion in Africa was inevitably a process of sustained hegemonic subjugation and nothing more. However, processing largely familiar material through the sieve of their Foucaultian discourse does not make the Comaroffs overlook the converts' agency. Africans' adoption of Christianity was generally not a passive process of hegemonic submission. Very soon already (cf. Shepperson & Price 1958) it became an act of appropriation and empowerment. In this connection Mudimbe (1997) has stressed, for first generation African Christian intellectuals, the role of Christianity in the 'liberation of African difference', while Mbembe (1988) highlighted similar processes in his *Afriques indociles* (also cf. Eboussi-Boulaga 1981). Christianity has created, in the course of the twentieth century, a 'mutant cultural order' (Mudimbe 1997) whose outlines, far beyond the individual Christian thinkers (Kagame, Kizerbo, Mulago, Mveng) whom Mudimbe highlights in this connection, may be illustrated with the following impression, which I derive from the ongoing Ph.D. research of Julie Ndaya (cf. 1999):

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Geschiere & van der Klei 1988 and Marut 2002 for Senegal; Ranger 1985, Kriger 1992 and Lan 1985 for Zimbabwe.

In July, 2000, Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, was the scene of a major church conference of the *Combat Spirituel* ('Spiritual Combat') movement. The conference involved close to 20,000 people, many of whom had travelled to Kinshasa from western Europe and other places of the Congolese diaspora. Obviously we are dealing here with a highly significant social phenomenon at a massive scale. The movement caters for upper middle class and professional people, especially women, who play leading roles in the movement's organisation. The movement's doctrine and ritual combine an original re-reading of the Bible with techniques of self-discovery and purification under the direction of female leaders. The spiritual battle that members have to engage in, is a struggle for self-realisation in the face of any kind of negations or repressions of personal identity, especially such as are often the fate of ambitious middle-class women in diasporic situations. In order to achieve this goal, it is imperative that all existing ties with the past, as embodied in the traditional cultural norms of historic Central African society, and as represented by the ancestors, are literally trampled underfoot. Thus a major part of regular church ritual is to go through the motions of vomiting upon evocations of the ancestors, and of violently and repeatedly stamping on their representations. The catharsis that this is to bring about is supposed to prepare one for the modern, hostile world at large. Some actual and intended members experience great difficulty in thus having to violently exorcise figures and symbols of authority and identity that even in the diffuse, virtualised kinship structure of urban Congolese society today have been held in considerable respect. But while this predicament suggests at least some residual resilience of historic African religion (otherwise there would be no hesitation at trampling the past and the ancestors), it is practically impossible for diasporic Congolese to tap, for further spiritual guidance, the resources of historic African religion in the form of divination, therapy and protective medicine: not one reliable and qualified Congolese specialist in historic African religion (*nganga*) is said to be found in, for instance, The Netherlands or even Belgium, where thousands of Congolese live.

Here we see much of the pattern of middle-class African Christianity towards the end of the twentieth century: the literate and Christian format appropriated as self-evident yet subjected to personal selective transformation, the rejection of an ancestral past and of African historic religion, the total inability to derive any spiritual resources from the latter, and the effect of being propelled into a mutant cosmopolitan cultural and spiritual solution that is African by the adherents original geography and biology, but not in substance.

## **THE SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL FRAMEWORK AS A CHALLENGE**

The current situation in Africa offers plenty of challenges for the sociology of religion to meet in the next fifty years. Meanwhile, it may not be superfluous to remind sociologists of religion of the fundamental historical requirements of any attempt to interpret current religious situations, in Africa or elsewhere. In many respects, today's religion is the symbolic condensation of the social, ethnic, political and economic contradictions of the recent and distant past – in other words more *en vogue* today, 'the memory'.<sup>24</sup> Any interpretation of similarity and difference on the basis of an examination of contemporary distribution patterns of religious phenomena needs to take into consideration their short-range and long-range history. This means that we have to create the institutional and financial means for historical research in addition to research into the topicalities of today, for which institutional and financial resources may be more readily available. It means that we have to actively protect sources of social and religious history, by creating collections of ephemeral and local documents (for which the religious sphere is notorious; cf. Barber & Maraes Farias 2000), and supporting the upkeep of regional archives, institutional (e.g. church, mission and mosque) archives, and national archives, which especially in Africa is an arduous undertaking.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Davie 2000; de Vries & Weber 2001; Asad 2003; Werbner 1997; Greene 2002; van Binsbergen 1981: 74 and *passim*.

Attention for the historical dimension particularly means that we do not allow ourselves to be imprisoned in the geopolitical self-evidences of today. Africa is a recent intellectual construct, as the great African scholar Mudimbe (1988, 1994) has reminded us persistently. In the euphoria of the immediate post-Independence period, and in acknowledgment of more recent Afrocentrist trends among African American and African intellectuals, many Africanists worldwide have come to engage in an ‘Africa for the Africans’ attitude. As concerns the creation of intellectual facilities for study, research and appointment such an attitude is wise and laudable, but it must not develop into the, quite common, self-censorship by which Africanists have increasingly refused to consider social and cultural phenomena on the African soil as part of wider movements involving other continents, while at the same time engaging in a mystique that sees a uniquely African quality, a general converging unity, in everything pertaining to the African continent. Such an attitude flies in the face of everything discussed above in terms of recent globalisation and proto-globalisation

Africa was the cradle of all mankind a few million years ago, and it was the cradle of anatomically modern man less than 200,000 years ago. In these respects the Afrocentrists among us cannot be beaten – Africa does occupy a unique place in global cultural history. However, in historical times, for the past few thousand years, Africa has been very much part of the wider world, contributing to intercontinental cultural and social developments as well as receiving its share from such developments in other continents. Many Africanist religious topics, including Islam, Christianity, spirit possession, mediumship, territorial cults, divination, have their origin mainly or at least partly outside the African continent, and any attempt to interpret these phenomena exclusively by reference to local social structure and symbolism is bound to fail (van Binsbergen 2003b, in press; in preparation).

A case in point is Hammond Tooke’s recent analysis of mediumistic divination among the Nguni peoples, which he declares an exception because all other Southern African peoples use the four-tablet oracle or a variant, for objective divination by means of a physical apparatus. This leads him to resort to two modes of explanation: a social-structural one (‘the strong patrilineal groups and the subordination of women among the Nguni’), and a diffusionist one but conceived entirely within the regional context (‘Nguni trance divination must largely have come from the San’). The social-structural argument is unconvincing, because it applies equally to the Tswana, who (until recently) did not have trance divination but relied on objective divination (Werbner 1989; Campbell 1979; van Binsbergen 1995). The San argument, while potentially valid, must yet be dismissed as too partial unconvincing in the light of my own recent research, which reveals strong South Asian elements in Nguni trance divination (van Binsbergen 2003b).

Admitting such intercontinental indebtedness for recent millennia is not in the least a disqualification of Africa, for exactly the same argument, and even more so, may be made for so-called European characteristics and achievements, including Christianity and modern science. Our admission on this point is only a reminder that broad continental categories are part of geopolitics, of ideology and identity construction, and not of detached analytic thought. There is a famous passage in Linton’s *Study of man* (1936) in which he describes the morning ritual of the average modern inhabitant of the North Atlantic: from the slippers he puts on his feet to the God to whom he prays, the cultural items involved have a heterogeneous and global provenance, nearly all hailing from outside the North Atlantic region. The cultural and intellectual achievements commonly claimed as exclusive to the European continent, are a concoction of transcultural intercontinental borrowings such as one may only expect in a small peninsula attached to the Asian land mass and due north of the African land mass, both continents several times the size of Europe. What makes things European to be European, and things African to be African, for that matter, is primarily the

*transformative localisation* after diffusion.<sup>25</sup> Transformative localisation gave rise to unmistakably, uniquely and genially Greek myths, philosophy, mathematics, politics, although virtually all the ingredients of these domains of Greek achievement had been borrowed from Phoenicia, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Egypt (and so by implication from Africa), Thracia, and the Danube lands. And a similar argument could be made for many splendid kingdoms and cultures of post-Neolithic Africa.<sup>26</sup>

In such a context of recognised variation within Africa, and of increasingly perceived intercontinental exchanges of religious forms between Africa, Asia and Europe, it is dangerous to make general pronouncements concerning the African religious situation as a whole. Such generalities are invariably part of a specific ideological appropriation of African life worlds and religious forms for specific political and identitary goals, as pursued by such categories as: North Atlantic and South African Christians, North Atlantic African Americans in the construction of Afrocentricity, Southern African academic philosophers, etc. Yet I will venture one such generalisation, in conclusion: on African immanentism.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF IMMANENTALISM: CAUSATION IN AFRICAN THOUGHT TRADITIONS**

What the world religions (Islam and Christianity) have brought to Africa, in addition to new idioms of religiously-underpinned sociability and new idioms of power legitimated in supernatural terms, is a new *interpretation of causation*:<sup>27</sup> one in which the notion of *transcendence* could become not only a theoretical possibility contemplated from a distance, but a deeply felt reality in everyday life and death. Having intensively participated in all three major domains of African religion for decades, it is my contention that here lies the one fundamental distinction between the world religions on the one hand, historic African religion on the other. Witchcraft beliefs and practices, the implausibility of natural death, the manipulative elements in the diviner-priest-healer's art, the captivating hold of the occult – all this does not *rule out* attitudes of adoration, surrender, dependence, humility, *yet* boils down to the fact that in historic African world views the human tends to be the measure of all things (not unlike classical Greek culture), while the supernatural tends to be considered either manipulable (as ancestors and spirits), or remote and otiose (as the high god).

Transcendentalist religion arose in the Ancient Near East (including Ancient Egypt) along with the emergence of writing and the state, and these three elements are intricately connected; together they have shaped much of the history of Asia and Europe in the last five millennia. The case of Ancient Egypt already demonstrates that these developments have far from passed by Africa, where writing, statehood and transcendentalist religion have never been completely absent in historical times; yet for most of that period large parts of Africa have had to do without. Instead, we have seen the survival and even resilience of historic African religion, and the failure to establish viable modern states based on the transcendence of the legal word and of the bureaucratic authority it generates. This state of affairs, which clearly has implications even beyond the religious field and affects the entire texture of contemporary African societies, including their incapability of generating a viable civil

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<sup>25</sup> On this concept cf. van Binsbergen 1997, 2000b, and in preparation.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen in preparation.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1991-1997; Marmura 1973; Mitchell 1965; Hammond-Tooke 1970; Pool 1994; van Binsbergen 1981; Horton 1967, 1971.

consensus as a basis for statehood. It is here that we hit upon the greatest challenge for the immediate future of Africa.

In a context in which the preservation of socio-cultural ‘biodiversity’ is globally advocated, where the assertion of identity is the politically most secure road to scarce resources, and where therefore the survival of historic African religion may be considered a good thing, how can African societies today yet install, in their members, the kind of views concerning causation and transcendence on which the functioning of modern societies elsewhere used to be largely dependent? (Or rather, used to be largely dependent, before the crises of postmodernity and globalisation.)

The question is far from simple, for transcendence is not only a prerequisite *but also a product* of literacy (through the violent distance which the written word creates vis-à-vis its referent) and of statehood (for the violent distance the state creates between its citizens and their immediate desires). So where should one begin? What renders the case even more complicated, is that we have become fully aware of the *hegemonic implications* of the kind of argument that I just presented. In order to construct itself and its science as universal, rational and objective (cf. Harding 1994, 1997), the North Atlantic region has needed to create, ‘to invent’ (in Mudimbe’s words) Africa as the proverbial antithesis, as the ultimate Other. In the face of the unmistakable humanity which Africans share with Europeans, that invention in itself is a result of the dubious capabilities of transcendence as contained in the scholarly word of North Atlantic science and philosophy. In an immanentist world view, the ultimate other scarcely exist – even the stone, plant and beast, even the witch, even the demon of the wilds, even the apartheid state’s executioner, even the North Atlantic objectifying social researcher, may be approached, given an anthropomorphic shape, and received back into the folds of humanity (van Binsbergen 1999b). The resilience of African historic religious forms (even if largely underground, aloof from the public gaze and the political centre) reflects, perhaps, the continued functioning of the immanentist domain as a secure conceptual home, where the transcendentalist *othering* (on the part of North Atlantic, Christian or Islamic hegemonic forces) does not penetrate so effectively and painfully, and where the fruits of millennia of African cultural resourcefulness (including a generally more egalitarian and complementary conception of gender; cf. van Binsbergen in preparation) may still be reaped. The real challenge on this point may lie in the creation of a worldwide context in which there is a place for African historic religion, both in Africa and outside, both among diasporic Africans and among non-African others, as a transformed spirituality of the village, although no longer in the village. The massive presence of an enormous variety of African religious forms, cults of divination and therapy, on the Internet, and their persistence and spread in and beyond diasporic communities in the North Atlantic, all testifies to the global potential of African religious forms today. It matches with the increasing retreat of the state, of book-based (as distinct from electronic screen-based) literacy, and of organised transcendent religion in the North Atlantic, and seems to foreshadow (for better or worse) a new era of post-rational, post-transcendentalist, multicentred global culture.

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