



OCCASIONAL PAPER

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World Religions and Community Religions Where does Africa fit in?

by

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My main concern in this paper is with terminology and the perpetuation of certain stereotyped images of Africa, which are inherent in the way it is too often used by academics, including in connection with religion. For present purposes, I am concerned about the way in which conventional academic speech about Africa contributes to picturing Africa as 'traditional', a continent which has been left virtually untouched by meaningful historical change of the sort acknowledged in respect of most other parts of the world. I will therefore start this paper with some reflections on terminology. I will then make a plea for a more dynamic and historical approach to the religious traditions of Africa, followed by a discussion of some characteristic features of the religious dynamism taking place in contemporary Africa in the form of new religious movements. I will end with a short conclusion, which places the religions of Africa among the religions of the world.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON TERMINOLOGY

It is a common practice among scholars and other observers to draw a distinction between 'world religions' and other religions. The concept of 'world religions' is normally applied to those religions which are based on some sort of written authority, such as the Indian religions, Christianity and Islam, while those which do not qualify for inclusion in this category are easily marginalised both in academic speech and practice. I am particularly referring here to religions based on oral traditions. In the literature these are often referred to as primitive, primal or pre-literate religions, or today, among more enlightened scholars of religion, as traditional or oral religions. The latter include the indigenous religions of Africa, commonly referred to as African Traditional Religions (ATR).

Moreover, a common approach in the description and analysis of religions is based on a distinction between so-called world religions and ethnic religions. In such a classification ethnic religions are considered as belief systems which are connected to a specific ethnic group (often referred to as 'tribe') and its culture (therefore also referred to as 'tribal' religions), while world religions are seen as being open to all peoples and conscious of a universal vocation. In the case of the latter, the role of the founder is considered of crucial importance; this stands in contrast to the so-called ethnic religions, which have arisen primarily in a single ethnic group, among one and the same people. They are popular religions in the literal sense of the word.

In most reference books and general works on religion the so-called world religions receive pride of place, despite the fact that there are millions of people who adhere, or continue to adhere, to some of the other religious traditions in the world. In fact, if the total number of adherents of all traditional religions were to be considered in one category, this would exceed the number of those who adhere to any single 'world religion'. In other words, the claim to universality of the so-called world religions is in many respects an unfounded or even a false one, which highlights the exclusive perspective of these religions and - notably in the case of Christianity and Islam - serves as an expression of their missionary zeal. That is to say, it expresses their perceived duty to conquer the world in the service of a claim to absolute truth; or, in more neutral terms, their inherent need to spread outside their community of origin. Hence, the labels we have briefly listed - 'primal', 'primitive', 'ethnic' etc., when applied to indigenous religions, are actually used to refer to the religious traditions, which are deemed to fall outside the mainstream of world history.

This leads us to one of the key elements of those religions, which are often qualified by adjectives such as the ones mentioned above: I am referring here to their *community* aspect. A salient characteristic of religions of this type, certainly until very recently, has indeed been their lack of motivation to broaden their appeal outside their own community. This does not mean that they lack the *ability* to incorporate newcomers within the community of believers. Rather, the opposite is the case: precisely because they lack a written dogma such religions are often rather open in character, very flexible and adaptable, prepared to make room for others and actually offering space for this purpose. This is true as regards people, but above all, as we shall shortly see, in regard to ideas. For want of a better term, and in an effort to avoid a vocabulary which carries pejorative connotations, I prefer to designate such religions with the more neutral term of community religions. This is not a term invented by myself, but is to be encountered in the literature from time to time, although its use is unsystematic. In using this term, on a provisional basis at least, we do justice to the most striking aspect of many of these religions, while at the same time drawing attention to their positive value for those who adhere to them.

The distinction between 'world religions' and 'ethnic religions', I would like to argue, suggests a distinction which was perhaps a valid one fifty years ago, but which today must be rejected as no longer holding much water. This may be demonstrated by recent developments within the so-called world religions. Precisely as a consequence of their claims to universalism, an enormous diversity has arisen within these religions, in the Western world as much as in the non-Western one. Interestingly, one of the most striking forms, which this diversity takes, is in fact the emergence of a great variety of *popular* religious expressions. What is today often referred to as 'popular' Christianity, 'popular' Buddhism or 'popular' Islam are all manifestations of a doctrinal belief which has adapted itself within the ambit of the world religions to the social context of the believers. The majority of such believers tend to be non-Western, poor, women, illiterate, or to reflect some other form of marginalisation. Especially in regard to the book religions, it is relevant to note that the number of illiterate believers has increased to the extent that today popular religiosity has become a marked feature of the world religions. Processes of inculturation and contextualisation have drawn the so-called world religions and ethnic religions closer to each other, in the sense that their relationship to, and integration in, a specific culture, forms a common element between them.

At the same time that 'world religions' have become popularised and thus assumed certain ethnic characteristics, the precise opposite has happened to 'ethnic religions', which have begun to display certain universalising tendencies. This is also the case with African traditional religions, which have now migrated to other parts of the world. Originally, this was to a large extent a consequence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which gave rise to the emergence of new religions such as umbanda and candomble. But in more recent times, too, we can observe how African religions - whether they originated in Africa itself, like African traditional religions, or were originally imports to Africa, such as Christianity and Islam - have traveled overseas. As a result of new migration patterns African religious traditions have now reached many parts of the Western world, including Europe, where many vibrant African Christian and Muslim communities exist now.¹ Among all these different expressions of African religiosity, a

¹For a description and analysis of the rise of African-initiated churches in Europe, see Gerrie ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise: African Christians in Europe*, Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998.

prominent feature remains what I earlier described as the most remarkable characteristic of all traditional or popular religions, namely their community aspect.² Their sense of community forms a binding element, which is firmly rooted in the traditional religions of Africa, while also incorporating aspects of continuity and change.

In the rest of this paper I will not dwell so much on the aspect of continuity as reflected in the perpetuation of tradition, but rather draw attention to the *modern* aspects of African 'traditional' religions.

TOWARDS A HISTORICAL MODEL OF AFRICAN RELIGIONS

The persistence of African community religions in modern times may come as a surprise to anyone who is accustomed to think about the world in terms of tradition versus modernity, but it is no more than a logical consequence of the dynamics of these religions which have helped them survive - or adapt - throughout the centuries. The use of the term 'traditional' tends to give many people a wrong impression, as it is associated with the idea of something static, unchanging, closed. In this way, an a-historical image of these religions is easily created and maintained. Hence, in conformity with general images of traditional society, they are often seen as more or less self-contained units, which can be studied as though in a laboratory. This frequently creates the impression that historical influence on such societies and their religions has occurred only in modern times, as a consequence of contact with the Western world.

It should be said that modern anthropology must accept a certain share of blame for the creation of such an image. Much of our knowledge about religious systems in the non-Western world is acquired from the information and insights provided by Western anthropologists. Their great virtue is the emphasis they have placed on empirical research. At the same time, anthropologists have often emphasised the functional aspect of religion, at the expense of the actual content of religious belief. Anthropology often shows itself most interested in the question of what role religion plays within a given society, or emphasises what individual writers see as the symbolic or philosophical content and meaning of religion in the social context in which it appears.

These general remarks are particularly relevant to Africa, where the theories of the great nineteenth-century evolutionists have been of enduring influence. Many of these theorists - writers of the generation of E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer - were preoccupied with a search for evidence of the origin of religion and believed that they could find this by studying traditional societies in Africa. All of them believed in the evolution of religion, in the sense that they believed a progress could be traced from irrationality to rationality. This evolutionary framework for a long time pervaded the thinking not only of Western anthropologists, but also of Western missionaries, who described much of what they encountered in African religious belief and practice as superstition or showing a lack of knowledge and logic. Such tendencies led to a situation where religious specialists, who in our own societies are generally labeled as priests or ministers, when encountered in Africa are to be described as witch-doctors, medicine-men, rainmakers and other similarly exotic titles. This is a terminology, which reflects a

² See e.g. Peter Clarke, 'Introduction to traditional religions', in: Stewart Sutherland & Peter B. Clarke (eds.), *The study of religion: Traditional and new religion*, London: Routledge, 1991:64.

belief that African societies are in a phase of development which modern Western societies left behind long ago.

The twentieth century has seen the development of a different approach whereby both missionaries and anthropologists have distanced themselves from the evolutionist approach of the nineteenth century, without yet acquiring a more historical approach to the traditional religions of Africa. The British historian Terence Ranger has even gone so far as to assert that, in reaction to the false history of nineteenth-century evolutionists, twentieth-century anthropologists ceased to ask historical questions altogether.³ I would not myself wish to pursue that assertion too far, but it is certainly the case that the dominant trend of twentieth-century anthropology was functionalism, whose practitioners focussed their attention on what they saw as the stabilising role of traditional religions in African societies. For this reason they were very often critical of missionaries, who in their opinion, through the process of conversion, had upset the delicate balance in various societies and thus the social balance as well (in which religion had such an important role, in their view). There is much more that could be said about the various approaches to the religious traditions of African which have been adopted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the main point here is to draw attention to the a-historical character of so many of these approaches, which in turn has helped to strengthen the perception that the religions which were the object of their study were indeed of an a-historical type.

Within the field of the academic study of religion there have been comparable tendencies in the approach taken towards traditional religions. One may notably think here of religious phenomenology which, till around 1960, was fashionable in theological faculties in the Netherlands and Nordic countries and which largely ignored the historical context of religions. The academic study of religion at that time took a religionistic approach, which emphasised the importance of the inner *Schauen* or the introspection of the (essence of) religious phenomena. An important additional factor, which contributed to an a-historical analysis of community religions was that these religions have no written tradition. Historical religions were conceived of as being only those religions, which had a scriptural tradition.

Nowadays, however, among modern-day scholars of religion, there is unanimous agreement on the need for a historical approach to African traditional religions which, like Christianity and Islam (to mention the two most important external religious influences in Africa), also have a historical experience of change and development. Still, it is only in comparatively recent times that specialists in the study of religion in Africa have explicitly introduced a historical dimension into their work. We are fortunate to find increasing help in this respect from African scholars, who are no longer content to leave the study of African religions in the hands of outsiders and who have applied themselves to in-depth study of the religious traditions of their own continent.⁴ All this creates a number of methodological problems, which cannot be discussed here for lack of space. I will limit myself to one important question which is of direct relevance and which is often the subject of academic debate, to the extent that it can not be

³Terence O. Ranger, 'African traditional religion', in: Sutherland & Clarke (eds.), 1991: 107.

⁴In 1992, for example, an African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR) was founded in Harare, Zimbabwe, in which African and non-African scholars work together. One notable fruit of this collaboration is a volume entitled *The study of religions in Africa: Past, present and prospects*, edited by Jan Platvoet, James Cox and Jacob Olupona, published in 1996 with Rootds and Branches in Cambridge, U.K.

avoided. I am referring to what we might call the insider/outside debate.⁵ The various pros and cons of the respective positions in this field can easily be surmised. African scholars of religion have the considerable advantage that they have an intimate knowledge of the cultural context of their study, one in which they have themselves been educated and which they thus know from within, as it were. One consequence is that they are familiar not only with the symbolic language, the various cultural metaphors employed, but also - very importantly - the language as a spoken and written vehicle of communication, via which religious traditions are transmitted. Outsiders, on the other hand, such as Western scholars of religion and anthropologists, have the advantage of a certain distance which reduces the risk of subjective judgment and which may help the attainment of a certain objectivity and neutrality.

The intention of this paper is not to propose a solution for any of these methodological problems, but to focus on the need for a different and innovative approach in the study of community religions. Some individual scholars have already given initial impulse to this, such as the British historian Terence Ranger, who calls for the development of a whole new model for the study of religion in Africa.⁶ The old-time idea which is still all too current, of a pre-colonial Africa which consisted of hundreds of individual 'tribes', each with its own religion, in his view needs to be modified by developing a more open and complex framework. Ranger has sketched the outlines of a theory of extensive regions of Africa within which one may identify enduring patterns of interaction and exchange between identifiable communities, typically of farmers established in village communities. These extensive regions form the site for the movement of groups, which are by nature mobile, such as hunters and traders, but also of people in search of salt, for example, or of pilgrims on their way to local shrines or other centers of spiritual power. This is a model, which emphasises social relations, integrating the various types of relationship between participants on different levels: kin, neighbours, migrants, nomads and travelers. It concerns not only relationships between people, but also between people and their natural environment, such as with land which people cultivate, the forest where men hunt, and forest groves, which are taboo and may not be entered. It is also a model, which defines the community aspect of African religions in an unusual way.

African religious ideas, according to Ranger, are to a large extent ideas about *relationships*: those with other human beings, with the spirits of the dead, with animals, with the land, with the forest. These relationships are often expressed in terms of relations with *spirits*, which we refer to as a 'spirit idiom': ancestral spirits, spirits of the land, water or forest, or alien spirits. The spirit idiom is one of personification, which dramatises the personal rather than the metaphorical aspect of the relationships: it represents something real and concrete. Spirits can manifest themselves by, quite literally, taking possession of a living person. In such a case a temporary personality change takes place, during which the possessed person assumes the personality ascribed to the possessing spirit. These and other ideas pertaining to relationships, the spirit world and spirit possession, all serve to regulate the relationships between people and the various rules which govern their interaction. At the same time the spirit

⁵See, among others, David Westerlund, 'Insiders and outsiders in the study of African religions', in: Jacob K. Olupona (ed.), *African traditional religions in contemporary society*, New York: Paragon House, 1991.

⁶See Ranger, 1991: 109-112.

idiom may serve as an explanatory model for illness, adversity or other forms of misfortune, which are perceived as a rupture in the proper relationship between the human and the spirit world. In order to restore the relationship one has to identify which spirit may be causing the disturbance and needs to be propitiated in order to redress the balance.

A model of the sort sketched by Ranger may, in the first instance, be seen as functionalist, but Ranger considers that there is much more to it than this. Thus, he insists on the fact that African religious ideas are not concerned only with relationships. They also provide reflections on the moral character of power, about the nature of personal identity, about good and evil, and other metaphysical or religiously inspired ideas. Like other religions, African traditional religions deal with gods and spirits; they are concerned with the concept of God as the world's creator, etc. He also insists that we must not lose sight of the fact that the regions which we study, and the flows of people and of ideas which occupy them, are themselves the product of long-lasting historical processes and thus subject to permanent change, including in regard to religion. It is by no means the case that these regional flows have produced a monolithic and coherent belief system, which coincides nicely with a given society as a whole. Each set of relationships implicates different people at different levels of interaction. Historians often refer to 'cults' in this connection, such as ancestral cults for example, which provide expression to the special relationship which a person or group has with their ancestors; or they may refer to territorial cults, which are related to the various relationships people have to the land, or to so-called cults of affliction, which assemble people who believe they have been afflicted by the same spirit, which causes them to be sick. Altogether, there is an enormous variety within the various regions of Africa and hence there are many cults, which may overlap or intrude upon each other or compete with one another.

The image given by Ranger of the diversity of African religions, of their receptiveness and dynamism, stands in sharp contrast to the older model of static, small-scale tribal societies. His dynamic model of the religious history of Africa leaves abundant room for innovation and also offers some insight into how new religious movements spread in Africa, such as the many prophetic movements which can be identified as having occurred all over the continent. For a long period it was thought that these small-scale and stable community religions could not cope with the processes of large-scale social change. African community religions were seen as archaic, unable to adapt to change (leave alone modern change), and were thus doomed to die out, like the dinosaurs. This was contrasted with a picture of the historic or world religions, oriented towards the future, characterised by literacy and - in the case of Christianity at least - by a commitment to Western capitalist values. Such an interpretation has been in need of revision for some time now, and this is increasingly urgent. In the process a new picture is being created of African community religions, which are perfectly capable of adjustment to the requirements of modern times, and have actually done so in response to major crises in the past, such as the slave trade. Although certain aspects of them may fall into disuse or become less attractive - because they seem less necessary or useful under new conditions - or even though certain elements may completely disappear, nevertheless it appears that such religions find new forms of expression and develop new ways of existing; or, if one prefers to put it that way, they develop survival strategies.

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN AFRICA

In short, then, Africa has always been a continent in change. Processes of change have taken place since the earliest centuries, including in religious matters. In the first instance this was the consequence of the encounter between different community religions, later (from the eighth century) as a result of contact with Islam and, many centuries later, also with Christianity. Earlier in this essay, the question was raised whether African traditional religions can be considered to be sufficiently equipped to cope with modern change, produced by such major phenomena as colonialism, technological innovation, mass media, and so on. In other words, how vital are African traditional religions in such circumstances? Or, what is the relationship between social and religious change in African religions?

All continents, of course, are subject to change, also in matters concerning religion. As evidence of this we may note that we find presently more new religious movements in non-Western countries than at any period of history which we can identify. This is certainly true of Africa where one telling example of the form that the relationship between social and religious change may take can be found in what is known in the literature as the African Independent Churches (AICs). These are to be found especially in areas with a strong Christian missionary influence, where they take the form of prophetic movements or otherwise movements of revitalisation. These indigenous churches form in fact the fastest-growing group of new religious movements in Africa, whose sheer number is itself testimony to an unprecedented religious diversity.⁷ They arose in response to the traditional Christian churches, on the initiative of local people outside the direct control of the missions, and were led by Africans. They are characterised by unique forms of social and political organisation and have developed their own doctrines on the basis of Christian belief.⁸

There are a number of reasons, which may be cited for the emergence of these new Christian churches.⁹ In an initial phase, the disappointment of African believers with some aspects of Christianity in the context of Africa led to the growth of prophetic and messianic movements. Another factor has been the translation of the Bible into various local languages, the importance of which would be hard to overstate as it has led to various forms of reinterpretation and spiritual renewal among African Christians. The basic divisions within Christianity, as reflected in the different denominations, in combination with the inadequacy of the so-called mainline churches in the face of the needs of African believers, equally furthered the foundation of African independent churches. Their inadequacy was notably felt in the important field of healing and

⁷There are no reliable statistics, but according to estimates provided by David Barrett in 1982, more than 7,000 new independent churches can be enumerated in Africa south of the Sahara with more than 32 million adherents (D.B. Barrett (ed.), *World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative study of churches and religions in the modern world, A.D. 1900-2000*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982: 782, 791). Gerard Oosthuizen, a well-known expert on African independent churches, estimates that in 1985 there were 12,000 independent churches on the African continent with a total membership of thirty million people (see G.C. Oosthuizen in *African Insight*, vol. 15, nr. 2, 1985). The vast majority of these are in South Africa, where in 1990 more than 30% of the black population was said to be a member of one of these churches (see David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, London/New York: Routledge, 1992: 114). Recent estimates suggest that at least half of the population belong to an AIC.

⁸Benetta W. Jules-Rosette, 'Tradition and continuity in African religions', in: Olupona, 1991: 151.

⁹*Ib.*: 150-1.

medicine and gave rise, for example, to specific expressions of African beliefs. Spiritual healing, a form of religious healing in which the spirit idiom prevails, is an outstanding characteristic of the independent churches, as it is of most new religious movements in Africa.¹⁰ One of the main strengths of African independent churches lies in their capacity for community building. In general, it can be said that at times of radical social change these churches have proved able to build new (moral) communities, and as such are capable of fulfilling an important role both in the new urbanised context of Africa as well as in the rural areas. Today, one may note similar developments within Islam, which is spreading rapidly also outside its original heartlands in Africa.

The creation of new religious movements is still continuing: the world has become a global village in a religious sense too. One consequence is that in Africa too, it is possible to find religious trends, which have little or no historical presence on the continent. These include religious movements, which reflect oriental influences or may even show signs of New Age thinking. All of these new religious movements show a high degree of continuity in both form and content. That is, they clearly build on existing and, one could say, traditional patterns of religion. Rosalind Hackett, who has done pioneering research in this field, speaks of a process of revitalisation of traditional religion in Africa.¹¹ She bases her observations on extensive research carried out in Nigeria, which is one of the best examples of religious diversity and dynamism in Africa. Hackett has posited the following five tendencies in the twentieth-century process of revitalisation:¹²

1. A tendency to universalisation
2. A tendency to modernisation
3. A tendency to commercialisation
4. A tendency to politicisation
5. A tendency to individualisation

I will proceed to discuss each of these tendencies, based on Hackett's work in Nigeria, drawing on examples given by her as well as on examples taken from other parts of Africa.

1. The tendency towards **universalisation** is tantamount to an effort to increase the attractiveness of African community religions and to increase their reach outside the particular group where a specific religion first came into existence. As a result, and under the influence of so-called world religions (notably Islam and Christianity), the concept of a Supreme Being has developed quite markedly, at the expense of local deities and spirits. An example of this may be seen in the Nigerian movement known as Godianism. This is a new religious movement, which was established in 1948 in an attempt to restore worship of the 'God of Africa'. The movement has developed from a rather politically oriented beginning to become something with a more pronounced cultural and philosophical flavour. Godianism can be seen as a philosophical reflection on African traditional religious customs, in such a way as to acquire a universal

¹⁰Spiritual healing also proves vital in the former missionary churches and, on occasion, has led to conflict between African and Western churches. See e.g. Gerrie ter Haar, *Spirit of Africa: The healing ministry of Archbishop Milingo of Zambia*, London: Hurst & Co., 1992.

¹¹R.L.J. Hackett, 'Revitalization in African Traditional Religion', in Olupona 1991: 135-149.

¹²*Ib.*

relevance. The movement serves a clear ideological interest. The founder and high priest of the movement strives to correct the widespread Western notion of African traditional religions as forms of 'paganism'. It is striking that Godianism presents itself as a movement, which has the capacity to unite all African traditional religions through a coherent philosophy. This is remarkable in Nigeria, a country of great size and diversity, and marks an attempt to overcome the differences between ethnic and, in a certain sense, national religious boundaries. We are thus witnessing in this case an intellectual approach to African religions, which is thoroughly in harmony with the requirements of modern times. Hackett describes the leader of the movement as an active propagandist, who travels around in a vehicle emblazoned with the slogan 'Godian Religion', and gives lectures at American universities. Godianism has also spread to other countries in West Africa, notably Ghana, where it has been actively propagated by a former Catholic priest.¹³ There are many other similar examples, not only in Ghana and Nigeria, but also in other parts of the African continent, of movements which have a similar aspiration towards universal appeal.

2. The tendency to **modernisation** takes various forms. One example provided by Hackett is the Aquarian Church of the Angels, established in 1981 in Nigeria's Imo State. The founder and leader of the church describes his church as 'a modernisation of the church of our forefathers', and as 'a new religious concept of religion which is almost akin to the traditional worshipping in the ancient times'.¹⁴ It is thus a reform movement which, basing itself in traditional religion, propagates elements which are also relevant to modern times, such as the concept of peace, stability and justice. Here too we see the development of the idea of a Supreme Being and other elements, which bear witness to the influence of Christianity. Another interesting example of the modernisation of traditional religious expressions is the creation in 1977 of a traditional shrine by a group of intellectuals on the campus of the University of Ile-Ife. (Ife is the holy city of the Yoruba, one of the major ethnic groups of Nigeria). This implies in practice that on the university campus the possibility henceforth exists to practice 'traditional' worship, alongside the existing facilities for worship in the Christian chapel and the Muslim mosque. An example of a different sort of modernisation of aspects of Yoruba religion is in the evolution of the Yoruba god of iron, named Ogun. In older times this was the patron of hunters and blacksmiths, but nowadays his appeal has broadened to embrace car mechanics, drivers and factory-workers, in short any group which is professionally concerned with the working of metals.

3. The tendency to the **politicisation** of traditional religions is often to be encountered among government and political leaders as a means of buttressing their power and authority. For example, it is commonplace for government leaders to pour libations on official occasions, such as at the opening of a school or hospital. Many African heads of state claim some sort of divine origin or connection, such as President Eyadéma of Togo or the late President Mobutu of former Zaire, and they have no hesitation in broadcasting this image of themselves via the mass media. They often cultivate spiritual advisors, who can even acquire positions of very considerable power. Other

¹³Father Vincent Damuah, who - under the name of Osofo Okomfo Damuah - recorded some of his experiences in a booklet entitled: *Miracle at the shrine: religious and revolutionary miracle in Ghana*, Accra, n.d. Damuah was also a founder-member of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) established in 1982 after the second military coup by (now) President Jerry Rawlings.

¹⁴Hackett 1991: 138.

examples of political tendencies can be found in the efforts of national governments to give African Traditional Religions (ATRs) as a discipline an official place in the school curriculum. Zimbabwe is a good example of this.¹⁵ In its time, African nationalism offered a nursery for the cultivation of traditional values, which could also be used for political ends. In more recent times this has become somewhat more difficult, although instructive examples can still be found, such as the role of spirit mediums during the liberation war in Zimbabwe.¹⁶ One might also think of the enduring appeal of secret societies, traditional religious organisations with considerable political power; or the continuing use of traditional rituals of enthronement, such as in Swaziland or Uganda. In each case this relates to complex networks where religion and politics merge with a view to maintaining or strengthening the traditional balance of power.

4. The tendency to **commercialisation** is apparent as part of a process whereby particular elements of traditional religions are, as it were, manufactured, i.e. developed into products and offered on the market for sale. The explicit aim is to promote significant aspects of African religious traditions by spreading ideas and symbols derived from them (such as in the above-mentioned case of Godianism). This may find expression, for example, in the propagation of African art, or of traditional healing methods, which connect to traditional ideas of sickness and other manifestations of evil. One good example of such commercial revitalisation may be found in the case of an Austrian artist who has become a Yoruba priestess in Nigeria. (This is also, incidentally, a good example of the religious incorporation of outsiders). This woman is very active in her priestly functions, among other things officiating at the annual religious festival in honour of the river-goddess Osun.¹⁷

5. The tendency towards **individualisation** marks a shift from a public-oriented approach to a more person-centered one. Individual rites are increasingly taking the place of public rituals, a development which clearly reflects the times we live in. An example of this can be found in the field of divination, a popular ritual with a crucial role in the traditional religion of the Yoruba and which aims at dis-covering (in the literal sense of the word) the individual's destination. Divination is very well adapted to the individual requirements of believers, for example in situations of crisis such as sickness, death or misfortune. But divination also finds application as an aid to success in business, for football matches or for students faced with exams, and so on. On such occasions people frequently summon the help of a traditional religious specialist, a diviner or marabout, whose role in Africa in many ways bears comparison with that of a psychotherapist in the United States.

It is striking that new religious movements in Africa notably flourish in towns and cities. They often have a definite orientation towards problem-solving and what might be called practical religion, as is generally the case with African community religions. This applies also to popular versions of Islam and Christianity. In consequence, all these movements exercise great appeal and attract a vast number of adherents. They fulfil

¹⁵See for example the series of publications that have emerged from a collaboration project between the University of Zimbabwe and Utrecht University in the Netherlands, notably the last of the series: G. ter Haar, A. Moyo & S.J. Nondo (eds.), *African traditional religions in religious education: A resource book with special reference to Zimbabwe*, Utrecht: Utrecht University, 1992.

¹⁶See David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and spirit mediums in Zimbabwe*, London: James Currey, 1985.

¹⁷Hackett, 1991: 144.

an important social function in various fields, such as concerning employment and education, marriage prospects and social welfare, counselling and healing, while also offering to their clients a certain amount of entertainment. In spite of their great diversity, a common denominator can be found in their striving for religious autonomy.¹⁸ This aspiration can be seen, for example, in the structure and leadership of these movements, in the opportunities they offer to lay people including notably women, in their use of dance and music, and in their innovations in the field of doctrine and ritual. It is a very creative process, in which certain Western practices, such as in the crucial area of healing, may be rejected and replaced with traditional forms of ritual healing, including religious expressions such as spirit possession.

THE NEWEST RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The hallmarks of these religious movements include rapid growth, structural mobility and increasing contact with other religious groups, a pragmatic spirituality, a search for freedom from external control as well as from exclusive domination by traditional practices, and reliance on their own instincts for choice and renewal. All of these have led in recent times to the emergence of a new type of new religious movement, marking a new phase in Africa's religious history. They are characterised by their international scope and orientation, reaching far beyond their original centers and outside particular ethnic groups. The global influence on these movements is detectable in their beliefs and practices, which combine elements borrowed from occultism, metaphysics, pentecostalism, fundamentalism and other tendencies. Sometimes movements of this sort are founded by Africans who have spent much of their lives abroad or are currently living there. They are usually very active in proselytisation and their leaders have often been trained in Britain or the United States, or in India for example. The revenues of these movements, too, are of an international character.

It would be possible to cite many examples of such 'new new religious movements', as Hackett (not very elegantly) calls them. One recent instance she quotes is from Kenya, the so-called Deliverance Church. This is one of the largest independent and indigenous churches in Kenya. It is a pentecostal church, which also has congregations in Uganda. Not only does it have a close relationship with a church community in California, but it has also developed plans for a direct satellite link with a number of countries with a view to broadcasting revivalist meetings worldwide.¹⁹ One may also point to examples of new African-initiated churches outside the African continent, such as in the Caribbean and the United States for example, and most recently also in Western Europe. In the Netherlands, for example, new churches are constantly appearing especially in the heavily urbanised areas where many African immigrants have settled. These churches are notable for their international orientation.

¹⁸The aspect of religious self-determination is strongly emphasised by Hackett. See R.I.J. Hackett, 'African new religious movements', in: Ursula King (ed.), *Turning points in religious studies: Essays in honour of Geoffrey Parrinder*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990: 192-200. In a way, this may be seen as an effort to eliminate the remaining vestiges of European colonialism.

¹⁹Hackett 1990: 197.

In my own work I refer to this new type of churches as 'African International Churches', a new historical type of AIC.²⁰

In short, we may say that, as Hackett points out, the latest generation of new religious movements in (or originating from) Africa can not be seen simply as instruments in the service of a process of inculturation.²¹ They should be viewed above all as religious communities, which have their origin in the interface between the so-called world religions and indigenous systems of belief, and as such they constitute a significant expression of the dynamics of modern times. They constitute self-conscious and collective efforts to reinterpret the world in which people live and to reconstruct this universe with the help of religious symbols and practices. The newest African religious movements are part of a worldwide trend that may be subsumed under the heading of 'religious transnationalism', that is to say movements which are not limited to, or defined by, national boundaries and which, often in an outgoing manner, propagate and cultivate a form of religious internationalism. Thus there are links between African new religious movements and comparable organisations in the United States, Japan, India and Europe.

CONCLUSION

This takes me back to where I started: the growing irrelevance of the distinction between 'world' religion and 'traditional' religions. An objective analysis of the religious situation today points to the fact that both should be considered as belonging to one and the same category, namely that of the *world's* religions. In any case this appears to be true of Africa, which has been the specific subject of discussion here. The traditional religions of Africa, I have been arguing, (and by the same token also community religions elsewhere in the world) are religions with a long and dynamic history, which in modern times have literally and figuratively crossed boundaries and have entered new territory. Rather than becoming weaker or otherwise declining in importance, these religions have emerged strong and vital from the confrontation with the so-called world religions. It is not to be expected that this process of revitalisation will come to a halt in the near or medium-term future. On the contrary, it will be worthwhile to see what type of interactions may occur between these modern 'traditional' religions on the one hand, that are taking their place among the religions of the world, and the traditional 'world' religions, which have associated themselves increasingly with particular communities, on the other. In any case, the study of African religious traditions will continue to demand our serious attention.

²⁰Ter Haar 1998, notably pp. 21-26.

²¹ Hackett 1990:198-9.