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SPIRITS IN POLITICS

Uncertainties of Power and Healing in African Societies

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Power and Healing in African Politics: An Introduction

Barbara Meier, Victor Igreja & Arne S. Steinforth

“For the African intellectual, of course, the problem is whether—and, if so, how—our cultures are to *become* modern. What is for the West a *fait accompli*—indeed, we might define modernity as the characteristic intellectual and social formation of the industrialized world—offers most Africans at best vistas of hope, at worst prospects to fear. But, plainly, the question what it is to *be* modern is one the Africans and Westerners may ask together. And [...] neither of us will understand what modernity is until we understand each other” (Appiah 1992, 107).

Researchers committed to the understanding of current social processes in African societies have ascertained that spirits feature persistently in political, economic and social action—either as subtle subtext or in decidedly apparent ways. Spirits’ involvement is evident in divination ceremonies in grassroots environments but also noted to determine interactions at various societal levels including government politics, warfare and peace-making, sports and the media as well as international economic transactions. In response to this observation, this anthology addresses persisting questions social anthropologists, historians, and political scientists working in African societies have been confronted with: Do spirits enter the scene after politics have failed as a relapse into an allegedly non-modern condition—as the concept of the ‘failed state’ suggests? Or do they precede colonial processes of political transformation, as classic theories of modernization try to establish, thus relegating African societies to a ‘pre-modern’ stage within this essentially evolutionistic ‘Heart of Darkness paradigm’?

This book seeks to extend the theoretical reflections on the relationship of religious phenomena in the socio-political sphere in African societies. It does so through case studies from Gabon and the Congo (Bernault), Sierra Leone (Combey), Nigeria (Harnischfeger), Mozambique (Igreja & Racine), Zambia (Kirsch), Zanzibar (Larsen), Uganda (Meier), South Africa (Niehaus), and Malawi (Steinforth) as well as arguing from a comparative African perspective (Ellis & ter Haar). Through a wide range of scholarly

expertise, this volume focuses on the concepts of modernity, power, and violence, adding the notion of healing to this context and investigating their empirical correlations. All the articles in this volume address entities and phenomena that challenge classical European distinctions of the 'natural' *versus* the 'supernatural'. The notion of spirits as implied by the title of this anthology therefore represents an idiom around which a number of related phenomena are clustered, addressing a broad range of religious categories that have otherwise been characterized as 'occult'.

The properties of the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary Africa have already been addressed by a number of scholars in the social sciences and humanities. Many of these contributions have indicated its deep interconnectedness with post-colonial development and democratization (Ashforth 2005; Ellis and ter Haar 2004; Ferguson 1999; Haynes 1996; Ranger 1986), have questioned the taken-for-grantedness of African religio-political exceptionalism (Green 2006; van Dijk and Pels 1996), and have critically addressed the alleged role of the 'occult' in African social and political life (Kiernan 2006; Ranger 2007; ter Haar and Ellis 2009). In social anthropology, a considerable number of scholars have dedicated their work to investigating the interplay between local concepts of witchcraft or magic and specific constellations of modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1995; Meyer and Pels 2003; Moore and Sanders 2001; Stroeken 2010; West 2005).

The quintessential crux of this discussion lies in the question of African secularism. In many specific historical contexts, repressive colonial and post-colonial measures have vowed to eradicate religion and associated 'traditional', non-scientific practices from politics in order to establish 'modern' state institutions and agents. The assumed failure of this project of secularization and the frequently violent conflicts that have marred the political landscapes in many African settings brings forward our analytic focus on healing that goes beyond the personal and addresses the re-creation of well-being and equilibrium on all levels of society. As an arena of secularization in its own right—ever since the colonial introduction of biomedical concepts and practices—, healing has managed to maintain an essentially pluralized character where secular and non-secular notions, however hierarchically arrayed, exist side by side. And it is here that spiritual and other transcendent forces feature as agents within these processes of social transformation. While, from an emic perspective, healing forms a

constitutive part of local cosmology, it is accessible for other modes of approach and has endured the general secularization project.

The articles in this volume are drawn from societies after political conflict or authoritarian regimes. What the contributions all have in common is a shared view on modalities of social healing as a response to disruptions which affect social reproduction. Thus, they offer a new way of re-contextualising the dynamic and unpredictable relations of spirits and politics, processes contributing to refashioning the fields of healing, politics, and religion in different regional settings. Through a comprehensive analysis of the diverse and overlapping pervasiveness of spirits and similar phenomena in society, the contributors to this book add to the recent body of evidence that religion is and has been, in overt and increasingly manifest ways, influencing political reasoning and decision making processes. Over time, the intersections of these spheres of social struggles have produced as much social stability and trust as uncertainty in different regions of the African continent. An understanding of these contemporary processes is necessary in order to grasp the diverse ways in which religious and political life has renewed the sense of modernity in postcolonial Africa.

Configurations of Modernities in Africa

It has become a common occurrence in the public sphere of many African countries to read newscasts indicating an all-out pervasion of everyday life with notions of religion such as spirits, gods, or witchcraft. Accordingly, prominent newspapers may relate that “In the School Quisse Mavota, the Mozambican government finances a ceremony to evoke the spirits of the dead to improve the level of children’s concentration in the class room” (as the Mozambican journal *CanalMoz* reported in May 2010) or that “One of Malawi’s ministers shocked many last Wednesday when he offered animal sacrifice to gods to spare President Bingu wa Mutharika’s life following a recent prophesy by Nigerian televangelist TB Joshua” (Njewa 2012).

To suggest that spiritual entities are part of the political—or that the political and spiritual spheres are not distinct realms of social practice at all—proves a problematic starting point to, among others, many African intellectuals drawing on classic but essentially European narratives of modernity. When looked at in multi-disciplinary contexts, magic and witch-

craft, as “symbolisations of processes [...] that [...] reach beyond the limits of reason” (Kapferer 2003, 22), tend to either confirm notions of a ‘pre-modern’ African state or to stir embarrassed silence among those who would like to embrace African societies as part of the modern, globally homogenizing world—but are at a loss with how to do so when confronted with the African spiritual engagement in secular contexts. But, as Bruce Kapferer (2003) cautions, and Koen Stroeken (2010) has demonstrated, it is misleading to juxtapose ‘magic’ or ‘occult phenomena’ to reason and rationality. Drawing from his research in Tanzania, Stroeken identifies parallels between witchcraft and modern science on one hand and magic and enchantment on the other.

From the mid-1990s onward, the question of modernity has become the focus of an ever-growing number of anthropological studies, many of which base their argument on the difficult relationship between specific ideas of a ‘modern life’ and cosmological categories (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Ferguson 1999; Geschiere, Meyer and Pels 2003; Geschiere 1995; Hefner 1998; Kahn 2001; Kiernan 2006; Luig 2005; Moore and Sanders 2001). The overall issue essential to this debate lies in the apparent noncompliance of former colonial societies with longstanding European and/or North American paradigms. In his critique of Peter Geschiere’s (1995) and Jean and John Comaroff’s (1993) ‘corollary of modernity’ paradigm, Stroeken argues against the alterity that ‘moderns’ attribute to witchcraft and supports Kapferer’s (2003) previous statement that “in their eagerness to diagnose the postcolonial predicament, authors such as the Comaroffs have been indirectly pathologizing magic, which brings us back to its association with irrationality, something our discipline seemed to have long left behind” (Stroeken 2010, 19–20).

Evolutionist narratives and, more recently, the neo-evolutionist program of classical modernization theory have stated how allegedly universal processes of social transformation create societies with certain homogeneous characteristics that mark them as modern—with individualization, rationalization, and secularization forming probably the most challenging of these criteria (cf. Parsons 1971; 1966). New theoretical approaches have then endeavoured to provide a less Eurocentric analytical framework in order to pluralize—and, in so doing, localize—modernities within their