Aspects of religion in Africa today

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1. Introduction

2. What is religion?

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many definition, but always:
a. belief in invisible, not empirical reality
b involving not only belief but also action, a ritual practice
c. and thus generating social power

did religion exist before the term?

3. Religion in Africa

It is an extremely complex phenomenon
a. traditional religion
b. Islam
c. Christianity

I am fortunate to have studied all three aspects over several decades, and I think I
arrived at some kind of general overview.

describe the three complexes

4. How is it possible that religion, although dealing with non-empirical beliefs, can be such an important social and political factor? part of the answer is: 'because it is an idiom of meaning and order'

is religion merely an obsolete illusion? a form of false consciousness?

that would only appear to be the case if we concentrate on the epistemological, cognitive side

then religion is very difficult to understand

especially it is difficult to understand why it can hold the African continent so in its grip

however

beyond the perspective stressing the false consciousness aspect of religion,

we may look at religion as a perspective to create meaning

and then it is obvious that religion constitutes an essential element in all human culture

traditional religion:

life and death

generation

good and evil

the relation between man and nature

cosmology

the cosmology underpinned by religion even if pre-scientific, is yet capable of creating order

5. The amazing force of religion, second aspect: 'because it is an idiom of power'

because of the ability to create meaning and order, and because of its projection into concrete human action and organisation, religion constitutes an idiom of power.

ancestors -- family + divination (parallel with China)

royal, deceased kings -- precolonial states (also here parallel with China)

these two forms underpin major processes of the exercise of power (inside family, over women and youths) and inside tributary states

it is understandable that, if so much of meaning and order was invested in these two religious institutions, African societies collapsed to a great extent when due to the introduction of other religious forms these two institutions were severely eroded

also cults organising in their own right and thus serving as structures of circulation and exploitation

6. If the above is the case, then religion may also form a context in which to challenge the power of others

this capability to create symbolic material by which to challenge the power of others is very similar to what we have seen in the first lecture in the study of ethnicity.

traditional religion versus the inroads of colonialism (primary resistance movements, Ranger)

Christianity was first a context for selective submission to the new forces with an element of challenge of the older local forces (often on the part of groups that were historically oppressed in African societies: women, youths, slaves, subject groups); soon however also Christianity became a context, in the second half of the colonial period, for contestation against white power

this gives us an insight which will be highly illuminating for the entire picture of religions in Africa during the twentieth century: it is the contradictions inside Christianity that have enabled its adherents to use it as a force of transformation. Religion is constantly be used in Africa in all sorts of contexts.

more in general we can say that Christianity and Islam both, as world religion, formed the religious context in which to challenge the power of chiefs and ancestors

Islam in postcolonial Africa is rapidly spreading for a number of reasons. In the first place it gives people the possibility of a supra-regional, supra-national identification with the entire community of Islam, and thus a liberation from their ethnic and national state of divisiveness. And in the second place (increasingly important especially after 9.11) Islam provides an alternative route through modernity, an alternative to North Atlantic hegemony, a context in which dignity can be asserted and regained in the face of oppressive North Atlantic models of knowledge and power

Finally, a major trend in twentieth century African religion has been the rise of Pentecostalism, as a form of Christianity that stresses the personal accessibility of the sacred and, much like Islam, the intercontinental spread of religious identities and organisation (flags around the altar).

For all these reason it is especially the young people, and of them the women, who seek in religion an expression for their aspirations of security, dignity and meaning

7. African religion is also a context for self-organisation

As such it has played an immensely important role.

When the local rural communities collapse and people move to towns, it is Christian churches and Islamic brotherhoods that then again provide a context of a fictive family, in which you are supported in cases of recent arrival in town, being jobless, having illness or death in the family, etc.

religion, in the context of world religions and new cults as much as in the context of historic African forms, is primarily an idiom of sociability, which brings people together and enables them to overcome their differences in the face of a higher conception of reality -- and then it is immaterial whether that higher reality is merely an illusion, or real -- it becomes a socially relevant reality at least through the effects which the believers actions have upon their self-organisation and upon society at large

but this works also above the personal level of face-to-face relations.

e.g. religious organisations turned out to form the backbone of the civil society confronting an increasingly corrupt and failing state which the wave of democratisation sweeping over Africa ca. 1990

also the anti-Apartheid struggle was partly, although not mainly, organised along religious lines, e.g. Archbishop Tutu

8. A context for regional and intercontinental identification beyond local parochialism

this aspect we have already mentioned above. Because especially world religions create forms of regional and intercontinental identification they can be a context where world-wide technological and educational achievements come within reach of individual Africans: education, medical services, contacts, development projects

world religions Islam and Christianity therefore may often represent a unifying force in the face of the divisive local ethnic tendencies, whose units are often supported by traditional leaders and their traditional religious practices

[placement ?]

but not only world religions thus become a path to modernity. they have not completely eclipsed traditional forms of African religion. in fact, certain forms of traditional religion as on the increase. e.g. girls initiation in Zambia, and traditional leadership in West Africa. e.g. Benin.

we should not think of the relationship between Islam and Christianity on the one hand, and historic African religion on the other, as completely mutually exclusive. Especially Islam in Africa has, as elsewhere in the world of Islam, shown a remarkable capacity for the selective adoption of historic African forms, which may vary from place to place, but often include ancestor veneration, the continued veneration of striking features in the landscape (rocks, trees, springs, sacred groves). Often the historic religion appears as a kind of substratum, which does not comes to the fore in the daily and weekly routine of social life, but which may only be mobilised in times of severe crisis: grave illness and death, and in the domain of great vital importance yet intimacy, such as sexuality. Among devout Christians in Africa one still often finds a evocation of witchcraft beliefs in cases of bereavement, as if the Christian idiom then is not strong enough to counter historic local modes of crating meaning, of making sense of a great loss. Also the ubiquitous conflict between the monogamy imposed by most Christian churches, and the practices of promiscuity and polygamy inherent in many African contexts until today, shows that time-honoured conception and practices relating to life force and its most obvious manifestations (in the forms of sexuality and in general, reproduction) are not easily controlled by religious conceptions introduced into the African continent from the outside. The resilience of African forms in these cases remind us that in the creation of meaning and order, an identity dynamics is at work whose implications are not always predictable. For many devout Christians and Muslims in Africa their world religion is a cornerstone of their identity, and as such is no longer perceived as an alien implant from another continent -- but underneath may lurk a historical cosmology and signification which may even, in times of crisis, lay an even greater claim to constituting identity.

9. Religion is also a context for individual and collective entrepreneurship

E.g. new religious forms as a means to break with the old community ties and insert oneself as an individual entrepreneur or worker, with upward social mobility aspirations which are no longer jeopardised by extensive loyalty to one's kin and local group.

Many religious leaders are in fact also highly entrepreneurial outside the religious sphere, in transport, retail trade, butcheries, bars

10. Religion in Africa as a reflection of major conflicts in the world today

The introduction of Christianity and Islam in Africa (not a recent phenomenon, but greatly increased from the second half of the 19th century -- i.e. 1850s -- onward) means that the great conflicts in the world today are largely reflected in the form of religious conflict in Africa.

- fundamentalism as a reaction to globalisation , the absence of boundaries

- create new boundaries, within which a new purity can be pursued in order to define oneself

- Islam and North Atlantic hegemonic Christian-based thinking as alternative modes, reinforced by historic accumulation of effects: Palestinian conflict, Oil crisis, Iranian revolution, Gulf War, 9.11...

11. Conclusion

Religion is not mere illusory than kinship, ethnicity, nationalism. It works, and continues to constitute a major influence on African social and political life, because from mere belief it becomes a social practice that generates power and that is capable of expressing the existing contradiction in the society -- and of generating new contradictions of a primarily religious nature.