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Chapter 1

Introduction: Theoretical explorations in African religion

Wim van Binsbergen and Matthew Schoffeleers

1 Overview

This collection of papers on theoretical and methodological perspectives in the study of African religion is the outcome of a conference which the editors were asked to convene on behalf of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, in December 1979.[1]

This introduction sets off with a brief description of the conference itself and the considerations which guided its organization. Following this, we discuss the papers in the present volume against the background of current debates in the field of African religious studies. While dealing with such rather divergent topics as a cross-cultural perspective on divination, the political significance of the Islamic revival in nineteenth-century Senegal, and the symbolic imagery of Southern African Christian churches – to mention but a few – the collection nevertheless displays a surprising convergence of theoretical problematics, as will be made clear in section 3. In section 4 we examine the specific arguments of the papers, adding our editorial comments. Throughout, we shall try to pinpoint some of the blind spots that we think can be discerned both in this volume and in other writings on African religion. These will be summarized in the conclusion in an attempt to define the limitations and the possible significance of the present collection.

2 The 1979 Leiden conference

For many years now the African Studies Centre at Leiden has

organized international conferences on topics that were considered vital to its research and publication programme. Since African religion has undoubtedly become one of those topics, as will be clear from the names of van Binsbergen, Buijtenhuijs, Daneel and Schoffeleers – all of whom have been associated with the centre over the past decade[2] – it seemed appropriate to make this the subject of one of these conferences.

The considerations that guided the convenors were the following.

Over the past fifteen years or so African religious studies have made considerable progress.[3] Before that time research was mainly limited to three topics: (a) local religious systems (ancestral cults, cults of affliction, regional cults, witchcraft and sorcery, magic, initiation, professional cults, royal cults) studied synchronically as aspects of a total social structure that was considered to be coterminous with an ethnic group, a nation, or a precolonial polity (cf. Smet, 1975); (b) the study of missionary and independent Christian churches in Africa (cf. Mitchell and Turner, 1966; Ofori, 1977; Wallis, 1967); (c) Islam in Africa, largely studies within the philological-historical tradition (cf. Willis, 1971; Zoghby, 1978). To this, a number of new interests had been added recently, by virtue of which the study of African religion became not only one of the most rapidly growing fields in African studies, but also a field where new insights in social, political and economic relations were being formulated which promised to be of importance also for the analysis of non-religious aspects of modern Africa.

One of these interests stemmed from the discovery that local religious systems have a history – and the subsequent exploration of that history, using new kinds of data such as oral tradition, language change, and patterns of ethnographic distribution (cf. Ranger and Kimambo, 1972). A necessary step towards such historical analysis is the production of regional syntheses of the available ethnographic materials.[4] Studies of Christianity and Islam had often acknowledged the relationships between these world religions and social, political and economic change in Africa. Now the study of the history of autochthonous African religions was also drawn into this orbit, as one began to explore the *transformation of historical African religious forms*. There was taking place, in this field, an intensive search for new conceptual and analytical frameworks within which these various innovatory religious phenomena could be grasped, and their non-religious

referents systematically interpreted. In this context we thought not only of a number of recent approaches to religious change (by, for example, Horton, M. Wilson and van Binsbergen),[5] but also of the new concepts of the regional cult (cf. Werbner 1977), and the territorial cult (cf. Schoffeleers, 1979), as attempts to come to terms with African religious organization on a larger scale.

Not only was there a growth of insight into the dynamics of autochthonous African religion; in the established field of studies of Christianity in Africa, new analyses concentrated upon religious interactions, syncretisms and confrontations between various innovatory trends, both within each of the two world religions, and within traditional African religion.[6]

While these are trends towards greater historical depth, and towards contextual interpretation within the framework of a wider social, political and economic structure, other prominent researchers (such as Victor Turner and Mary Douglas)[7] have moved from their individual African field studies towards the formulation of broad, general principles concerning such topics as thought, language, meaning, symbolism and the social process in small groups. This development connects with the work of a number of American scholars including Fernandez, MacGaffey, Janzen, Fabian and Jules-Rosette.[8]

Behind us lay a fifteen-year period of eager and creative exploration. It was the aim of the conference to draw up a balance sheet, particularly with reference to the following points:

> Is it possible to indicate, in recent work in this field, certain blind-spots, both descriptively and analytically?
> Much recent work in this field has in common with all pioneering studies that its methods are defective and intuitive. What would remain of this work if strict methodological criticism were applied? Is it possible to develop more adequate methods? Is there really something like a uniquely African religion, the characteristics of which can be defined as more or less applicable throughout the continent?[9] Is it not impossible, for most of us, to study more than the mere surface of African religions (cf. Okot p'Bitek, 1970; Setiloane, 1979)? What would remain of African religious research if we were to adopt, in this field, the radical materialism advocated by such writers as Mafeje (1975) and Depelchin (1979)?

Finally, most recent studies have in common that their theory is implicit, little developed and often very eclectic. Would it be possible to formulate the underlying theoretical content explicitly, and to effect a confrontation of rival theoretical positions? Could we arrive at better theory? Should we? Like other sectors of African studies, the study of religion began to open itself to neo-marxist approaches.[10] What had the latter achieved so far in this field, and what was to be expected from them, especially with regard to various non-religious contexts which are relevant for the analysis of religious phenomena?

Briefly, at the conference we meant to evaluate recent religious research in Africa in order to arrive at greater methodological and theoretical precision and validity. For this purpose, primarily descriptive contributions were not considered appropriate, and papers were therefore solicited that would deal with attempts at synthesis, critical (including self-critical) reflections on earlier work, and explicit theoretical and methodological discussions of aspects of recent African religious studies. However, it was understood that these more general concerns could also be developed out of the discussion of specific case studies – provided that these would be analytical rather than descriptive, explicitly addressing themselves to a theoretical problematic.

The conference brought together close to forty participants, from Zaire, Zambia, South Africa, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Sweden (Bengt Sundkler, the Nestor of African religious studies, attended the conference as guest of honour) and the USA. The participants belonged to such various disciplines as anthropology, history, political science and theology (particularly church history).

There were nineteen formal papers, duplicated and circulated in advance. These were supplemented by a number of oral presentations: the 'Welcoming Address' delivered by J. Voorhoeve (the chairman of the Board of the African Studies Centre), van Binsbergen's more thematic 'Opening Address', and a three-fold series of 'Concluding Remarks', by Ranger (Manchester), Schoffeleers and Sundkler – the latter in an inimitable style blending the African fieldworker and the minister of religion. The four days of the conference allowed for ample discussion of all papers, both by formal discussants and by the floor. One afternoon was devoted to

a more informal panel discussion of the methodological, human and political-economic aspects of doing fieldwork on religion in contemporary Africa. R. Werbner (Manchester), W. de Mahieu (Louvain) and van Binsbergen delivered oral presentations on this occasion. This session enabled our African participants particularly to try and link, through their passionate and penetrating discussions, our perhaps rather esoteric approaches to African religion to the practical and political problems confronting Africa today. Due to the extensive non-academic support acknowledged in note 1, and to the participants' genuine desire to cross the cultural, disciplinary and paradigmatic boundaries that made for such a rich variety among them, the conference was an unqualified success.

The first day was devoted to problems of general theory and method. H. Turner (Aberdeen), A. Droogers (Amsterdam) and van Binsbergen discussed their particular solutions to the theoretical problems attending our study of African religion today, applying the framework of comparative religion, methodological eclecticism and neo-Marxism, in that order.[11] Then, M. Schoffeleers and J. Jansen (Kansas) dealt with such methodological problems as historical reconstruction and the impact of literacy.[12] J. Fernandez (Princeton) whose paper was presented *in absentia* by Janzen, applied himself directly to one of two major themes that, in a way unforeseen by the organizers, were to dominate the conference: the relation between contextualized, social-structural analyses, on the one hand, and non-contextualized, culture-specific, symbolic analyses, on the other.[13] Fernandez's emphasis on the religious images in African religion, that should not be swept away by 'image-less' analyses in terms of the social, economic and political context of African religion, formed a suitable transition to the papers by R. Devisch (Louvain), R. Bureau (Paris) and de Mahieu (Louvain), in which structuralist and phenomenological attempts to penetrate the symbolism of African religion were presented.[14] Ngokwey Ndolamb's (Kinshasa/Los Angeles) discussion of the dialectics of anti-sorcery movements swung rather in the contextualist direction, while Werbner's (Manchester) study of regional cults in Southern Africa formed an attempt at synthesis, dealing with both social-structural context and symbolic content.[15]

The social-structural approach was again to dominate the

conference's fourth day, when Ranger (Manchester), Buijtenhuijs (Leiden), J. P. Dozon (Paris) and J. de Wolf (Utrecht) discussed developments in African religion in terms of relations of production, class structures, class consciousness, and tensions and contradictions which these generate within individual societies.[16] With the exception of Ranger's, these papers referred to case studies of varieties of African Christianity, and thus introduced the second major theme emerging in the conference: the exchange between scientific observers of African religion past and present, on the one hand, and on the other hand theologians whose commitment to, and personal involvement in, the spread of Christianity in Africa naturally goes beyond academic interest. In this vein F. Verstraelen (Leiden), L. Pirouet (Cambridge) and Sundkler (Uppsala) presented papers on aspects of Christian history in Africa; A. Hastings's (Aberdeen) paper was available at the conference, but was in his absence only briefly introduced by Ranger.[17] In a way, the two emerging themes of the conference converged, in so far as the theologians' perspective could be seen as that of one particular category of insiders on the contemporary religious scene in Africa, inclined to absorb and rejoice in, rather than to take apart and contextualize, the images of African Christianity in its various independent and missionary forms.

It was clearly impossible to work the total written output of the conference into a single volume of the present series of Monographs from the African Studies Centre. When a selection had to be made, we felt that the theoretical and methodological papers, which explored the relation between symbolic structure and social structure as well as the limitations of the concept of structure itself, were more directly in line with the original aims of the conference. Plans to accommodate the theological papers in a separate collection have not yet borne fruit. Further selection of papers was necessary, since we insisted on including some additional papers that took their data from Islam in Africa (not represented at the conference), and papers that expanded the theoretical scope of the present collection into such topics as religious pluralism and religious responses to peasantization. All papers were substantially rewritten on the basis of both the conference discussions and our editorial comments which were partly informed by those discussions. In this respect the present collection greatly benefited from the concerted efforts at intellectual exchange and clarification by all involved in the conference, and we sincerely wish to acknowledge the great contribution made to it by the many colleagues who participated in the conference but whose papers do not appear here in print.

3 The present collection of papers

The papers brought together in this collection show great variety in the topics, approaches and parts of the African continent from which they draw their empirical data. Yet the collection has a distinct thematic unity, in that all papers may be seen as partial and converging contributions to a joint problematic. This is the development of a theoretical approach to African religion which would offer a synthesis along the following axes:

(a) semiotic analysis of interrelations between symbols versus social-structural analysis of the social, political and economic contexts within which these symbols are produced and reproduced; and
(b) structural analyses (of symbols and/or contexts) as under (a) versus more transactionalist approaches stressing the participants' ability to create, manipulate and innovate symbolic and social configurations, of varying degrees of permanence, in concrete settings (including such religious events as rituals, divining and healing seances, etc.).

A linguistic analogy may be illuminating here. Internal analyses of African belief systems, rituals, myths, could be regarded as syntaxes of religious symbols. Contextualized analyses of the way African religious symbols are related to the various non-religious aspects of the societies in which they occur, could then be regarded as syntaxes of social structure. Both types of syntaxes are actualized by participants whose more or less ephemeral cognitive and material transactions (being creative, manipulative, at times deviant) would display a tension *vis-à-vis* both symbolic and social structures, a tension not unsimilar to that between syntax and natural speech.

The problem of the merging of structural and transactional approaches in the study of religion has received relatively little

discussion so far. The book entitled *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, edited by Leach in 1968, might be regarded as an early contribution to the debate. Within the field of African religious studies Victor Turner's *Drums of Affliction* (1968) is an attempt to combine both approaches in one masterly case study, whose method few of us could emulate for lack of data and, indeed, lack of genius. Recently, however, anthropology has undergone a shift towards approaches where participants are brought back in 'in the active voice' (the title of Mary Douglas's recent book which states this shift; Douglas, 1982). Where so much has been written, in African religious studies, on the structural side, time has come to render the notion of structure both more relative and more dynamic in the light of participants' concrete transactions in concrete situations that have religious relevance.

In the present collection, Fabian and Devisch address themselves specifically to this problem. Fabian's solution is a new 'ethnographic' approach, for which he offers detailed prescriptions. As in his other work (e.g. Fabian, 1979; 1981), he advocates an interpretive approach to African religion, exhorting the ethnographer, as it were, to collude with and to interpret African religion, rather than to adopt a detached attitude aiming at structural 'explanation'.[18] Devisch addresses the same problematic from the point of view of African divination. Here the solution, he argues, lies in what he calls a 'praxeological' approach, which focuses our attention on the diviner's capability to manipulate creatively his divinatory apparatus and symbolism so as to produce, in his audience, a sense of illumination, discovery, revelation. While Devisch's abstract treatment may leave some readers in doubt as to what 'praxeological' means in the context of divination, we have here in fact the closest possible analogy to a somewhat more familiar activity, viz. preaching (cf. Dassetto, 1980). In both cases

> meaning is constituted which by inventive manipulation shows itself relevant to the actual situation so as to achieve individual and collective goals or functions simultaneously. In this process the participants grow into the group of the concerned . . ., generating their concern. (Devisch, *infra*, p. 77)

A particularly pregnant illustration of this analogy may be found in

Fernandez's sensitive analysis of a sermon in the Bwiti cult of Gabon (Fernandez, 1966), but in a general sense it seems to hold true for every sermon which aims at explaining religious mysteries. Divination and preaching in many ways stand at the opposite pole from established ritual because of the role accorded to the diviner's or preacher's personal creativity. Instead of executing a fixed sequence of activities, both the diviner and the preacher are expected to explicate the inner meaning of things and they are given at least a certain amount of freedom to reveal new aspects or make conventional truths appear in a new light. It might therefore be fruitful in future to examine this analogy more closely and to explore in what sense African sermons may be viewed as a transformation[19] of the divinatory process. There is a structural similarity between these two forms of revelation just as there is one between African conceptions of the role of the diviner and that of the Christian minister (Kuper, 1979; Schoffeleers, in press). Students of Islam will recognize the same homiletic mechanisms to be at work there.

However, while Devisch and Fabian pose the problem and offer tentative strategies by which to build the transactional element into our researches on African religion, their arguments fall short of solving the problem; first because they do not attempt to bring the more permanent social-structural elements back in; second, because they hesitate to consider the role of the researcher himself. Devisch might have reflected on the similarities between the diviner's role, and that of the student of African religion. Are the intellectual operations which we perform upon the African religious data not a form of 'metadivination', seeking to reveal the inner meaning of the African phenomena and producing, in our academic audiences, a sense of illumination, etc.? Some African diviners are reported to look upon their handiwork as mainly technical and uninspired, while most scholars working on African traditional religion would pose as non-believers *vis-à-vis* that religion; what counts, in both roles, is not whether the specialist subscribes to the religious contents he is conveying, but whether he manages to weave a tale of sufficient cognitive subtlety and creative literary power to captivate his audience. In modern anthropology, Victor Turner's would be, again, the most obvious example of a scholarly stance in which such divinatory elements are unmistakable. Does this, perhaps, also mean that the validity

of the statements we produce as scholars of African religion is of an order comparable to the validity of an African diviner's statements?[20]

While from the praxeological point of view the researcher of African religion could be brought in towards the final stages of the empirical cycle (by the time he or she produces statements on African religion before an academic audience), Fabian's 'ethnographic' approach enables us, at least in principle, to understand this researcher at an initial stage: when, as a fieldworker, he or she is personally involved in the transactions that in concrete situations make up African religious events. Fabian has, however, not taken this opportunity to consider our role as fieldworkers. In his contribution, as in all others in this collection (with the exception of two short remarks in Drooger's paper), the fieldworker on African religion remains out of focus. Hundreds of scholars or would-be scholars have studied African religion through fieldwork. The fact that so few scholarly publications exist that take such fieldwork as their main topic (de Craemer (1976) and Jules-Rosette (1975) are, however, notable exceptions) may well indicate the extent to which our own epistemological, emotional and existential orientation as analysts comfortably escapes analysis.[21]

It is a major weakness of this collection as a whole that, while it clearly states the praxeological and the structure-centred analytical positions, it does not yet succeed in advancing a method that combines them in a balanced manner. As one of the present writers has argued elsewhere, this state of affairs has a particularly negative effect on comparative studies in African religion:

> The religious concepts and beliefs we are discussing . . . have a strong situational aspect. . . . They take shape, and alter, in concrete ritual actions mainly. . . . Such actions, and the religious notions which emanate through such actions, are therefore very specifically bound to concrete settings of time and place, to the relationships existing between the concrete people involved in a specific ritual situation, to the specific crises they go through, and to the creatively evolving symbolizing these people are engaged in. This means that it is already a very risky undertaking to make definite, comprehensive statements about the symbolic content of any one religious form, eg., ancestor worship, or the Bituma cult, among the contemporary Nkoya religious forms with which my field-work has familiarized me. Even on the level of a single-tribe study, a generalized ethnographic account of a symbolic system is likely to produce artefacts of abstraction and systematization, which are far removed from actual, dynamic ritual practice. . . . *But at what hopeless level of extreme artificiality are we then operating if we attempt a regional and historical analysis of symbolic contents each of which is tied to the situational specificity of myriads of concrete social and ritual settings*? And finally, how justified are we at all to project our ethnographic knowledge of any contemporary symbolic system back into the past? (van Binsbergen, 1981: pp. 37–38; emphasis added)

It would appear as if only the development of metasyntaxes of ethnographic situations, capable of being generalized across societal, cultural and linguistic boundaries and thus amenable to cross-cultural application, could ultimately provide a solution on this point; but this would require, for each specific description of African ritual, finely grained data of a transactional nature (including the fieldworker's own reflexive analysis of the field responses generated in and by his or her presence). Classic African religious ethnography does not offer such data, and even in modern ethnography they are very scarce.

While the search for a solution to this dilemma has to continue, we should now turn to the second main problematic unifying this collection: the relation between two types of structural analysis, one that produces symbolic syntaxes versus one that produces social syntaxes.

The production of symbolic syntaxes has received a major impetus through the work of Lévi-Strauss and of French structuralism in general. In the last decade, under such names as 'cognitive anthropology', 'semiotics', 'symbolic anthropology', a whole new sub-discipline has emerged internationally. In the present volume, Droogers claims that this approach should have precedence over all others, while de Mahieu's contribution is an outstanding and original example of the sort of analyses which this approach seeks to produce. At the same time it is an extreme example, in that it refrains almost entirely from relating the symbolic syntax to a social syntax. In de Mahieu's argument the

social, political and economic structure of Komo society (whose circumcision myth he analyses) remains out of scope.

Somewhat more common are symbolic studies which do try to contextualize symbolic syntaxes by explaining the nature and relations between major religious symbols at least partly in terms of social, political and economic structures. In the field of African religious studies, mention could be made of the work of Mary Douglas on the Lele, Elizabeth Colson on the Tonga, and much of Victor Turner's on the Ndembu.[22] In these studies the original inspiration of the seminal works of Durkheim and Mauss is strongly felt. At the other extreme of structural approach to symbolic data is the Marxist tradition, never really mute but much more vocal during the last two decades, which seeks to explain symbolic syntaxes primarily by reference to material conditions such as are defined in the political economy of the social formations in which symbolic forms emerge, mature, and are subsequently transformed or rendered obsolete, as the case may be.

These complementary approaches can only be brought together once the theory and method that define each are made explicit (e.g. by applying them to one well-analysed case), and are improved in the light of both internal and external criticism. Some of the papers in this collection do precisely this. Thus de Mahieu's paper is a statement of the present state of the art in the symbolic analysis of cosmological myth in Africa. Janzen's paper is a step forward in the internal, 'symbolic', not to say literary, analysis of the written texts whose production was prompted by the introduction of literacy in Africa. The papers by Buijtenhuijs and Coulon, on the other hand, can be read as exercises in the methodology of social contextualization – and its limitations.

However, confluence between these mainstreams of theory and method in the contemporary study of African religion cannot be brought about by merely widening and deepening the beds of the various streams. So what are the mechanisms through which this confluence is effected? And what are the implications of the confluence? Recently, this problem has taken great prominence in the work of a number of French authors, prominent among whom are Pierre Bourdieu and Marc Augé.[23] Taking the lead from Bourdieu, the problem at hand could be summarized, if not solved, in the following terms:

> Symbolic power, a subordinate power, is a transformed – *i.e.* misrecognizable, transfigured, and legitimated – form of the other forms of power. A unified science of practices must supersede the choice between energy models and cybernetic models which make them relations of communication, *in order to describe the transformational laws which govern the transmutation of the different forms of capital into symbolic capital*. The crucial process to be studied is the work of dissimulation and transfiguration (in a word, euphemization) which makes it possible to transfigure relations of force by getting the violence they objectively contain misrecognized/recognized, so transforming them into a symbolic power, capable of producing effects without visible expenditure of energy. (Bourdieu, 1979: p. 83; emphasis added)

Whereas studies in terms of social, economic and political structures would cast light on the power relations between relevant groups and categories within a society (sexes, generations, kin groupings, classes, castes, ethnic groups, racial groups, etc.), syntaxes of symbols could be linked to such approaches once it is understood that the combinations and permutations of symbols, as studied in structuralist analyses, constitute a symbolic capital that, either in its own right or in specific relations with material capital, is manipulated in the interaction between individuals and groups. Bourdieu concentrates on the question of how material capital is transmuted into symbolic capital; in other words, how dominant classes make use of symbolic power to 'dissimulate' reality in the perception of the oppressed classes, and thus to buttress the former's position. But the alternative question is equally important: symbolic capital, once generated, can and often does lead on to material capital, and thus to the emergence of new relations between classes, ethnic groups or racial groups. Some of the contributions in this volume specifically deal with the process through which *symbolic power is mobilized from below*, by rural Africans in Kenya and Southern Africa (Buijtenhuijs, Werbner), or by Islamic leaders in nineteenth-century Senegal (Coulon), not as the expression of an already existing class relationship to be discussed in material political-economy terms, but as the precondition for the emergence of such class relations.

What are needed, therefore, are confluence theories that

combine analyses in terms of power (both symbolic and non-symbolic) with analyses in terms of symbolic syntaxes – in other words, communication. The distinction between both streams should not, however, be exaggerated: social, political and economic structures, and their development over time, are themselves also imbued with symbols of varying degrees of relative autonomy and interconnectedness. By no means should the relation between symbolic power and non-symbolic power be reduced to one between an allegedly epiphenomenal 'superstructure' and a material infrastructure, considered to be so fundamental that it automatically determines symbolizing processes (Godelier, 1975, 1978; van Binsbergen, 1981: pp. 52–4, 69–71). At the same time a second limitation of Bourdieu's view is not to be overlooked. His emphasis on symbolic and material power *structures* could, and should, be complemented by an exploration of the ways in which, *transactionally*, participants create and manipulate rather ephemeral symbolic and material power in concrete situations; Devisch's and Fabian's papers offer excellent examples of this.

To offer a fully fledged confluence approach is the ambition of Werbner's paper, whose attempt to read the 'argument of images' in the religious movements from Southern Central Africa blends symbolic syntax and social structure in a way that is highly stimulating – although we doubt whether this 'argument', as interpreted for us by Werbner's, could be developed into a generalized methodology that is less idiosyncratically Werbnerian.

The three papers to which we have not referred so far (by Ranger, Schoffeleers and van Binsbergen) deal with the relation between material and symbolic power in a historical perspective. Schoffeleers and van Binsbergen look at myths from Malawi and Tunisia respectively. Identifying the symbolic syntaxes that operate in these myths, the power relations that attended the myths' production in the first place, and subsequently their functioning in contemporary society, these authors manage to extract, from underneath layers of symbolism and manipulative distortion, the fragments of properly historical information that the myths contain. Ranger concentrates on the pronouncements through which the major Southern African regional cult (Mwari) reflects on changes in relations of production during the colonial period, and argues that these pronouncements were meant to maintain a viable peasantry in the face of threatening proletarianization; in

passing, the cult's role in underpinning pre-capitalist modes of production (particularly the tributary mode) is indicated. These historical contributions, however, fail to address themselves to what seems to be the crucial historical question in the context of this book: why is it that history (as the intellectual product of local participants, and of outsider academic historians) should mediate between symbolic and material power? The papers tell us, convincingly, that this is what history does, but the underlying mechanisms escape explicit discussion.[24]

The various contributions to this collection could be regarded as situated at specific points in a Cartesian co-ordinate system comprising two axes. One axis is defined by the opposition between structural analysis and transactional or praxeological analysis. The other axis is defined by the opposition between analysis in terms of material power and analysis in terms of symbolic syntaxes, linked, as argued above, by symbols' capability of generating symbolic power. The specific positions of the various contributions could be tentatively represented as in Figure 1.1.

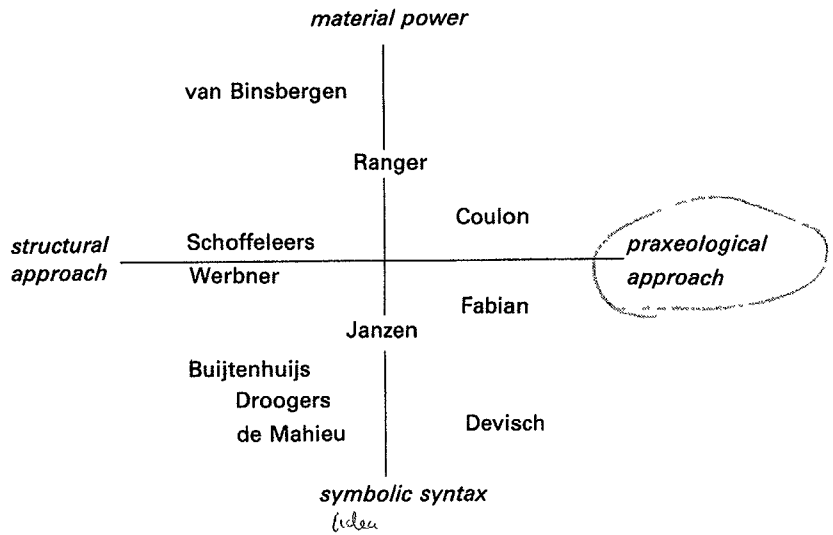

Figure 1.1 *Relative positions of the contributors to this collection, along the dimensions 'material power versus symbolic syntax' and 'structural versus praxeological approach'*

While the methodological and theoretical approaches offered in this book must be considered to be tentative and partial, they may not be hopelessly so. They may at least help us to formulate relevant questions. The history of science is there to suggest that this, and not the production of the 'right' answers, is the decisive step towards greater insight.

This said, let us now turn to a more detailed discussion of the individual papers.

4 Discussion of the individual arguments

Devisch

Devisch's encyclopedic paper contains a veritable *tour de force* of bibliographic compilation, critical evaluation and theoretical innovation in the field of African divination studies. This chapter owes much to the author's extensive field experience, and to the fact that divination studies have been undertaken for many decades, producing some of the most seminal work in African religious studies.[25] One would wish similar overviews to be available for all major components of African religion.

The prevailing, largely functionalist approaches to African divination were synthesized by Gluckman in his *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society* (1965). Against this background, Turner's contributions (republished in 1975 as *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*) largely consisted in the emphasis on the structural element in divination: intrasocietal conflict was shown to find an expression through the divinatory process. For Turner, the revelatory aspect of Ndembu ritual was to be found *not* in divination, but in cults of affliction, of which he offered such splendid descriptions and analyses (Turner, 1957; 1962; 1968). What is new, now, in Devisch's approach is that he convincingly argues the revelatory aspect of African divination; this aspect of divination could not be grasped (as in Ndembu cults of affliction) in the Turnerian terms of '*anti-structure*' or '*communitas*' (Turner, 1974; 1975), yet it offers, to the participants, an illuminating and motivating perspective upon their social reality.

This discovery of the revelatory dimension in divination has considerable comparative significance, particularly in connection

with the problem of prophetism in Africa. Implicit in Devisch's analysis is the point that, structurally, the African diviner may not be so totally different from the African prophet as we have always thought. Thus Devisch offers a possible mechanism for the transformation of diviner into prophet and vice versa. This transformation was first noted by Rigby (1975) for Buganda, but the latter author could not yet indicate the theoretical reasons and the underlying mechanisms that accounted for it.

Then, there is Devisch's emphasis on the performative, dramatical and generally aesthetic aspects of divination. Where so much attention has been paid to the cognitive and organizational sides of African religion, the time has come to develop an approach which enables us to appreciate the more implicit, momentaneous and ephemeral, partly non-verbal dynamic elements in African religious performances. It seems to be largely on this level that the power of religious symbols is effected, and that the emotive aspects of African religion (on which scholars have had so surprisingly little to say) are released. An aesthetic theory that pieces together our knowledge of African ritual interactions and performance with comparative material more habitually drawn into the orbit of aesthetic analysis (drama, poetry, rhetoric, music, dance, in Africa and elsewhere) might greatly enhance our insight into African religion, and would at the same time render more of a real-life feel to our scholarly discussions of the topic.[26] Devisch's argument clearly contains additional significant elements for the construction of such an aesthetic approach.

The third point we would make in connection with Devisch's paper refers to the well-documented potential of African divination (just like some cults of affliction, regional cults and the world religions) to cross ethnic, cultural and linguistic boundaries.[27] Especially in the increasingly polyethnic social situations of contemporary Africa, diviners are seen to cater for a clientele with whom they do not share basic tenets of culture, symbolism and social organization. Such crossing of social and cultural boundaries in divination by no means appears to be a recent phenomenon: on the African continent strangerhood seems rarely to have been incompatible with the diviner's role, and often it appears to be an asset. The praxeological approach, emphasizing symbolic manipulation and dramatic interaction between concrete participants in a specific setting, could be argued to transcend, in principle,

whatever is culture-specific in divination. People's cognitions (and the symbolic and social-organizational structures underlying these) may separate them, yet the praxeological emphasis on their concrete interactions and transactions in the course of the seance enables us to see how those structural boundaries are crossed. Yet, beyond the specific concrete situation of the diviner's seance, it is a legitimate question to ask what precisely is being communicated between diviner and client when these two participants do not have full competence in each other's culture and when their communication is thwarted by the imperfect use of a lingua franca, or of a language of which only one of them is a native speaker. From the praxeological point of view, the answer would be that, for lack of a common symbolic language, diviner and client *create* one in the course of the session. But on what basis? Regionally distributed cultural traints, or the widespread idiom of world religions, can provide only part of such a basis. If one hesitates to invoke universal human traits which all individuals may have in common, the most obvious answer on this point would be in terms of the locally prevailing social structure. One could postulate that in the seance social, economic and political contradictions are being reflected upon. These contradictions (which partly stem from modes of production, power relations between generations, the sexes, classes and other major social groups) are brought to the fore in the disguise of symbolic oppositions contained in the divinatory apparatus, the diviner's manipulations, his pronouncements, etc., and receive a partial and temporary solution in the dramatic sequence of the seance. These contradictions might be sufficiently fundamental, and 'objective', so as not to be totally constrained by the communicable symbolic expressions of diviner and client on either side of the polyethnic and linguistic boundaries that separate these participants. In other words, whereas language and culture might create boundaries between diviner and client, on a deeper level these people would yet partake in a similar social context, share similar experiences, and communicate on that basis. If Devisch had extended his analysis into the social-structural domain, the validity of our speculations on this point might have been gauged somewhat more specifically. Now all we can say is that social structure remains to be brought into the praxeological approach as advocated by Devisch. The problem is particularly pressing with regard to Devisch's treatment of social innovation as

mediated by divination. For why should divination, as if it were an immutable and uneffected basic datum, be the instrument *par excellence* to transmit and interpret social, economic and political change in the wider society, when the alternative is equally plausible: social-structural changes assaulting the very effectiveness of the divinatory model, depriving it of such legitimating and resolving power as Devisch now attributes to it?[28]

De Mahieu

If divination and preaching are to be seen as activities by which symbols are manipulated so as to generate meaning in relation to the flow of events, myths may be viewed as devices by which societies emphasize permanency. It has been this aspect which has particularly informed the Malinowskian (Malinowski, 1948) view of myths as legitimizing traditional positions and institutions, and there actually was not much more anthropology had to say on the subject till the advent of structuralism. Surprisingly enough, however, structuralism never came to occupy a place of prominence in Africanist anthropology; for apart from Luc de Heusch (1972) and Adam Kuper (1982) there seem to have been no major representatives of this approach. This may have been due partly to the long-lasting influence of a variety of functionalist approaches, and partly to their fairly rapid succession by a variety of neo-Marxist approaches. But whatever the case, semantic anthropology such as developed and as still developing in Africanist studies tends to be much more culture-specific than classic structuralism. De Mahieu's chapter on Komo circumcision myths in the present volume is a case in point, and it clearly brings out some of the advantages of such culture-specific analyses. Foremost among these is the possibility of accounting for the entire body of symbolic data contained in a mythical text and not just for part of it as is customary in the Lévi-Straussian tradition. In addition to this, the culture-specific approach may allow us to explore connections between seemingly unconnected texts revealing transformations of various kinds which otherwise would have remained hidden. The net result is that, at least in principle, we obtain a much clearer picture of the way such texts are woven into the total fabric of a culture.

With regard to de Mahieu's paper two points of wider significance could be made.

The first concerns the nature and scope of the concept of transformation. Following accepted structuralist approaches, which are firmly rooted in modern general linguistics (cf. Chomsky, 1965), de Mahieu uses the concept of transformation for a specific relation between two levels of the participants' reality: (a) an elaborate surface structure which is manifest in overt speech and action and which allows for direct inspection by outsider researchers; and (b) a simpler deep structure, which the participants are not consciously aware of and which is not open for direct empirical inspection by researchers, but which the latter can only try to reconstruct by their own intellectual efforts. The assumption is that systematic rules govern the process by which the deep structure is carried over, or projected, into the surface structure; in the structuralist idiom these rules are called 'transformations'. Since only the surface structure is open for investigation, the main problem of the structuralist approach (as well as its major methodological weakness) is how to argue the validity of statements defining transformation rules and deep structures. For surely, a multitude of possible rules, applied in a multitude of possible combinations to a multitude of possible deep structures, could be invoked to explain one and the same surface structure. Attempts over the last few decades to produce structuralist analyses for a great many cultural and artistic complexes from all over the world and from different historical periods have, however, led to the emergence of a basic structuralist methodology; e.g. one discovered a limited number of transformational principles (featuring such symbolic pairs as animate/inanimate, left/right, up/down, and their permutations and inversions) which seemed to apply to a very wide variety of settings. De Mahieu clearly draws on this comparative background with confidence, while enhancing the persuasiveness of his analysis by bringing to bear upon it his extensive knowledge of Komo culture and society. Still, the fundamental structuralist dilemma, as indicated here, remains. Thus, when de Mahieu invokes the tenets of structuralism to argue the necessity of transformation (pp. 85 f.), one cannot help wondering what would happen to his analysis if the structuralist dilemma would ultimately prove to be insoluble.

In passing we note that in the field of African religious studies

the concept of transformation is also used in a non-structuralist sense, notably to denote sequences of configurational similarity, and systematic difference, in content, form or function (possibly to be explained by historical change) that connect two *surface* structures. Transformations such as we claimed above to exist between diviner, preacher and prophet are of this nature. Again, Werbner's analysis of the transformations between three concrete surface structures (religious movements in Southern Central Africa) on the whole follows this usage, despite the fact that the 'argument of images' he tries to reconstruct partly seems to develop at the level of some unspecified deep structure.

Our second observation concerns the necessity (to borrow de Mahieu's terminology) of contextualization. It was not de Mahieu's intention to explore the historical and social dimension of these texts, as he makes clear himself at one point of his analysis. Yet it would be an obvious next step to explore whether the two texts originated in different historical settings and whether they reflect social tensions in present-day Komo society. The point is, of course, that semantic analyses in terms of cultural categories have ultimately to be complemented by analyses in terms of broad historical movements and social contradictions. People's myths do not function at the metaphysical level alone. Why is it, for instance, that the Komo have *two* circumcision myths and not one? The author argues that this stems from some internal necessity – internal, that is, to the culture in question. But why does that same necessity apparently not operate in relation to other cultural features? And what about the possibility that the two myths came into existence at different periods in Komo history and/or that they are proper to different population segments, e.g. autochthones and invaders? In other words, could these myths not be part of the power struggle within that society, reflecting changing relations of production? We are not suggesting that this would destroy de Mahieu's analysis, which seems convincing enough as it stands, but it would certainly modify it to some extent.

Droogers

The similarity between, or at least complementarity of, African participants' religious cognitions and activities on the one hand, and our scholarly research and writing on these topics on the

other, crops up in several places in Droogers's review of the merits and demerits of the classic approaches to religious change. Droogers argues that our theorizing should be eclectic and accumulative, instead of indulging in 'waste-making' of alternative approaches. He arrives at the conclusion that the semantic approach must be considered the most inclusive, since it provides room for both the informant and the researcher in their shared role of meaning-makers, and since it can be combined with other useful approaches.

One wonders if Droogers is not too generous on this point, for it would appear as if for the time being the combining potential allegedly inherent in the semantic approach has nowhere been explicitly realized. The semantic approach in so far as it has been developed or is being developed fills in the large space left open, particularly by functionalism and neo-Marxism, but it has as yet failed to make clear what relations exist between the material and the symbolling side of religion. More importantly, even, the semantic approach has still little to say about religious *change*, the very topic of Droogers's contribution. One can see this illustrated in the two specifically semantic contributions in this volume (Devisch and de Mahieu). Neither tells us much about the role of divination and myth in power relations and in the change of power relations. More precisely, neither makes clear how and in what sense their otherwise excellent analyses complement the functionalist or neo-Marxist views.

Second, while we wholeheartedly agree with Droogers that profound similarities exist between participants in African religion and ourselves, the researchers, one should not stretch the analogy too far. If students of African religion are like diviners, their clientele do not consist of participants in African religion, but of fellow-members of the North Atlantic society (and the extensions of that society, among intellectual elites in the Third World). Therefore, we may acknowledge the meaning-maker in the African participant, but we must at the same time realize that he makes meaning for a different audience. This calls to mind the severe criticism levelled by Okot p'Bitek (1971) against Western scholarship on African religion. While that criticism may seem fair (it has gone remarkably unchallenged over all these years), we may well wonder whether the nature of African religious studies allows us to produce anything but the very artefacts for which

Okot p'Bitek takes us to task (however, cf. Ogot, 1971); and even so, the result may have more value than Okot p'Bitek suggests.

Droogers's concern to save the heuristic potential of discarded theoretical approaches is praiseworthy (cf. van Binsbergen, 1981: pp. 68–9).[29] Yet, beyond a generalized eclecticism of 'let a thousand approaches to African religion bloom', one should develop a more qualified, hierarchical eclecticism, favouring some approaches over others, because they differ in illuminating power, or because rival approaches could be recast in terms of the favoured approach. This is in fact what Droogers himself does, when his own declared eclecticism yet leads him to favour the semantic approach.

Anyway, the historical development of science would seem to advocate a dynamic theoretical strategy. The state of the art in African religious studies today more or less unexpectedly imposed a converging problematic upon the contributors of this book. Each pursues a different approach, but the collection as a whole turns out to be far from eclectic. There is, also in this field, a historical accumulation of problems, tendencies, insights, which selectively informs the next step the discipline is to take. The point is not to preserve all leftovers for some unspecified future second use – they are bound to go stale; but purposely to select for the benefit of a new and more penetrating synthesis.

Fabian

Like Droogers, Fabian begins his paper with the image of the academic marketplace. Ever since Durkheim, anthropologists have preferred to think in terms of a single religious system in regard of the societies they studied. Although in many cases Christianity, either in its missionary or its independent forms or both, was very much part of the local scene, it was often carefully filtered out to arrive at or reconstruct so-called traditional forms of religion. Times have changed meanwhile, and even the most inveterate antiquarian in the anthropological profession has to admit to the inescapable reality of religious pluralism. But the blood creeps where it cannot flow, and equally inescapably Durkheim's ghost returned to the scene when pluralism was shown to be just another word for a unitarian system. Where the old missionaries had given their lives to explain that Christianity and traditional religion were irreconcilable entities – a creed to which

many of the old anthropologists subscribed, even if they were themselves declared atheists – the younger generation of anthropologists and historians seems to delight in proving that the two are in reality one. Folk-Christianity and popular Islam have become the catchwords.[30]

Fabian rebels against this, but he goes further than that. He also objects to the classic approach to single religious systems as unitary constructs. That, he argues, is a distorted view which has come about by divorcing religion from the events in which it is always actualized. Taking his lead from sociolinguistics and more particularly the 'ethnography of speaking', Fabian argues that the quest for uniformity of dogma and conformity of behaviour is to be regarded as just one variety of religious expression and not its norm. Just as a speaker may switch from one language to another, or from one code or register to another, so it is with religious behaviour. As the sociolinguistic critics of structural linguistics rediscovered, speech can also be poetic, and the strictly referential sign-function of language is therefore also to be regarded as a special case and not as the rule. Fabian inveighs here against semiotic theories of meaning which at present occupy such a prominent place in the anthropology of religion – and of which, in this volume, de Mahieu and Droogers could be identified as exponents. Rather like Devisch he advocates a praxeological approach which frees religious behaviour from structural semiotics and which provides room for poetic invention and innovation. In fact, the manipulation of symbols in the lengthy verbal document that plays a pivotal part in Fabian's paper resembles divination – as does Fabian's treatment of this document.

One advantage of Fabian's approach is that it allows for the incorporation of history and the transactional element in religious behaviour, something one sorely misses in present semiotic studies. His ethnographic approach seems, moreover, at least in principle, to allow for the role of the fieldworker to be accommodated within our overall framework; even though, as remarked above, this potential is not realized in his contribution. But does his ethnographic approach also allow for the incorporation of the more permanent, structured, collective elements? The latter may have been overemphasized in the study of religion, but they surely have not disappeared with the emergence of transactional approaches. It is certainly true that the ethnographic sequence to

some extent creates its own context (just as a work of fiction as a whole, presented as a sequence in time, provides an evolving context for each of its constituent elements); yet there is a wider social-structural context, which the participants in any specific religion do not themselves create, but take for granted and from which they derive most of the form and content of their actual exchanges; just as a reader needs knowledge of the world, and not just of the preceding pages of a novel, to grasp a particular passage in that novel. The 'ethnographic' approach advocated by Fabian does not seem to be particularly well equipped to explore this wider context and assess its religious significance, but it lays a timely stress on participants' freedom to manipulate and innovate that context in concrete situations.

Schoffeleers and van Binsbergen

With the next two papers we leave religious behaviour in a specific ethnographic setting as one situation where the confluence between symbolic and social-structural analysis could be effected, and we turn to another situation: the encoding of history in religious myths. As in all historical analysis, the problem of social-structural context operates on two levels here. On the one hand non-religious features in the past provide a structural context for past and present religious symbols, but on the other hand it is only through an analysis of the present-day social, political and economic structure that in any historical document (including mythical materials, typically collected in oral form) the grains of historical information can be winnowed from the chaff of participants' contemporary projections, legitimations, distortions, etc.

Addressing themselves to this problematic, the arguments of Schoffeleers and van Binsbergen complement each other in various ways.

Schoffeleers goes to great lengths to develop an interpretative method which, when applied to substantially different variants of the Mbona myth from Southern Malawi, produces historical information on that area which, when paired with ancient Portuguese documents (cf. Schoffeleers, 1978), makes these myths into an independent source of historical information. It has been customary in the past to base long-range historical reconstructions

primarily on the oral recollections of ruling families, the reason being that it was these families that possessed the most extensive corpus of oral history. The result has been that many of the reconstructions appeared to be one-sided, representing the view of the aristocracy and little else besides. Most oral historians have recognized this danger meanwhile, and have therefore tried to draw their evidence from a broader base by concentrating not only on political history but also on economic and even on family history. Schoffeleers's paper points to another source for long-range historical reconstruction, which is available in many parts of Africa, and which has the advantage that it does not, or does not exclusively, base itself on the recollections of the aristocracy. We are referring here to the earth and fertility cults, which in many ways form a direct contrast to the royal cults because of their inclusivist character. They are cults that, in Turner's words (Turner, 1974: p. 185), emphasize common interests and values over those of specific social and political groups. The most obvious example of such a cult, or at least the best known nowadays, is the Mwari cult, which has its centre in Zimbabwe but whose influence reaches beyond that country into Botswana. But it is by no means the only one, as Mitchell showed as far back as 1961. In the collection of essays *Guardians of the Land* (Schoffeleers, 1979), a number of case studies are presented from Southern and South Central Africa which show convincingly the not inconsiderable historiographical potential of these cults. In the present volume, Schoffeleers makes the same point, presenting material from the Mbona cult in Malawi. His primary purpose in this paper, however, is not to engage in a detailed historical reconstruction, but to show in a more general way that the Mbona myths can be made to yield historical information. More particularly, he tries to show that this information is different from that obtained from the ruling houses in that it represents the folk view. While doing so, he makes a plea for a more careful consideration of evidence from religious sources, and he takes issue with structuralists such as de Heusch (1972) who deny the historiographical potential of mythical material.

Van Binsbergen's treatment of the myth of the Islamic saint Sidi Mhammad in North-Western Tunisia follows a different course. He argues that the variants of the myth he collected display no systematic and historically relevant variation. The myth is then

subjected to cursory semantic and structuralist analysis (which shows that it contains themes that are standard in North African hagiography) and to a more elaborate social-structural analysis, which throws light on the relationship between territorial segments and saint worship. This relationship finds expression not only in pilgrimage and offerings, but also in geographical myths. The myths depict relations between saints and their alleged wanderings over the countryside in some mythical past – images which in a standardized way reflect the present alignment and recent migratory history of localized social groups. In order to pinpoint the unique, properly historical information contained in the myth of Sidi Mhammad, we have to identify to what extent the myth contains far from unique symbolic elements and references to social organization that follow a repetitive pattern. This requires very extensive knowledge of the local area's history over the last two centuries; and such knowledge has to derive from other oral-historical sources than the myth. When such information is brought to bear upon the myth, all the myth turns out to tell us, historically, is the specific direction of a migratory movement one small immigrant group (now no longer in control of the area nor of its shrines) made over a distance of a few kilometres in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Thus while Schoffeleers manages to extract crucial historical information from a Malawian myth, van Binsbergen shows how the Tunisian myth he analyses contains only the most trivial bit of history. In this respect the myth of Sidi Mhammad is not so different from the medieval Christian legends which served to explain the origin of (mostly) minor pilgrimage centres in Europe – in contrast with the major centres (such as Rome, Compostella, Canterbury) whose origins are, through myths, linked to unique historical events (Turner and Turner, 1978). The slight historical content of the myth of Sidi Mhammad is concealed under so much semantic and social-structural material that the elaborate process of extracting that content seems scarcely worth our while – unless for two reasons. The extraction method itself, when read reversely, might come close to portraying the transformation process (in the non-structuralist sense) through which history is encoded in myth. And second, comparison between the Malawian and the Tunisian myth raises the question as to why it is that some types of myth are carriers of highly significant, traceable historical

information, while others are mere trivial appendages of history (that is to say, of history as an outsider academic historian would describe it). Regrettably, the authors refrained from considering these essential questions in their arguments.

The presence, in the myth, of allusions to major social conflict which remain consciously interpretable for the participants appears to be a crucial variable in this connection. The myth of Mbona still carries a significant message concerning the relationship, in Southern Malawi, between secular and religious authority, and between the aristocracy and the commoners (whose hero Mbona is). Chieftainship and the territorial cult of Mbona are still viable institutions in the area, although both have, of course, undergone major changes since the inception of the Mbona cult some four centuries ago. The myth's message concerning the confrontation between major power blocs still carries relevance for the local people. The myth of Sidi Mhammad also reflects on some historical confrontation between social groups: notably, on the graduation of the immigrant 'Arfawiya group, from being co-residing dependants of the Ulad ben Sayyid group, to becoming equals of the latter, residing in their own acquired territory at some slight distance. While the myth of Sidi Mhammad initially constituted the 'Arfawiya's declaration of independence and of religious power (for it is they who erected and controlled the shrine of Sidi Mhammad), this message is now entirely lost on the present-day inhabitants of the valley of Sidi Mhammad: a newly immigrated group (the Zeghaydiya) eclipsed the 'Arfawiya, economically, politically and in terms of control over the shrines. The myth, and indeed the shrines, have taken on a new function, that of expressing the unity of the valley's population under the hegemony of the Zeghaydiya. The myth stresses local unity and dissimulates the local group's heterogeneous origins and immigrant status (which, if admitted, would jeopardize these groups' rights to local land and diminish their prestige); also genealogies, and the knowledge people have concerning past places of residence and migration, are incessantly manipulated so as to maintain the ahistorical illusion of common origins and non-divisiveness. Thus it appears to be variations in the contemporary social and political power structure which determine how past information on power relations is preserved in myth.

Janzen

Having thus explored some of the uses to which *oral* materials can be put in our research on African religion, Janzen's paper calls our attention to the consequences of literacy in African religion.

In Africa we have a great opportunity of examining the transition from spoken to written texts. This transition cannot fail but to have consequences for the form and content of African religion. Thus the introduction of the Bible and the Qur'an confronted African populations for the first time with canonic texts – that is to say, texts which are by definition unchangeable, but which allow individuals and groups to appropriate an interpretational monopoly, thereby providing an instrument for defining, allotting and controlling religious power in more or less formal religious organizations of considerable geographical scope.

On the other hand, Africans also began to produce their own written texts on a number of subjects, such as traditional cultural practices, history or their own interpretations of Christianity. If one is to analyse the impact of literacy on religion, so Janzen argues, one of the things to do is to analyse the literary forms, and in order to do this, one has to compare them with oral forms. Which oral forms are carried over into literature and to what extent? Second, one has to look for combinations of forms. Does literature provide opportunities for new combinations? Third, one has to consider the genesis of new forms. Janzen has identified such a new form in what he calls the 'ethnographic genre'.[31] This genre contains several coded expressive domains. Janzen identified six of these: (a) the spatial and temporal distribution of events, (b) exchange of gifts and prestations, (c) social structure, (d) ritual objects, and finally two verbal elements to complement the preceding non-verbal ones, (e) verbal categories of ritual action, and (f) the lyrical message.

These distinctions may foreshadow an emerging methodology with which we may be able to examine African religious texts in future. However, before we can do so confidently a number of questions will have to be considered more explicitly than Janzen does in his contribution. Thus, for instance, the systematic status of these six categories in the framework of some more elaborate theory of the production and change of religious images and forms remains unclear. As descriptive categories they may be useful for

the specific purpose of analysing the Lemba texts from lower Zaire, but would they equally apply to other texts? How are we to distinguish systematically between, for example, such closely connected themes as 'exchange of gifts and prestations' and 'social structure'? And what is the relation between the image of social structure conjured up in the locally produced 'ethnographic' texts (an image that is strongly theocratic, as if society wholly consists of *ritual* roles and relationships), and the social-structural analysis that an outsider analyst, primarily Janzen himself, would put forward (cf. Janzen, 1978)?

Janzen's argument is comparable to Devisch's and de Mahieu's in that he throws light upon aspects of symbolism without, however, linking up with the social, political and economic structures that surround, and that to a large extent prompt, the production and functioning of the texts under analysis. Penetrating, along the lines of Janzen's incipient method, into the internal organization of these texts, we can now begin to explore the sociological consequences of literacy for African religion. Does literacy lead to changing modes of conceptualization, changing patterns of ritual action, organization and control? And to what extent are the analytical categories Janzen presents exclusive to literacy? They might also apply, at least partly, to the content and structure of African oral texts, and *a fortiori* to the oral texts (sermons, pious stories, believers' testimonies, forms of oratory as used at church council meetings, etc.) that feature in modern African religion, as oral extensions of literacy.

Werbner

The struggle to arrive at a sophisticated joint treatment of both symbolic and social structure finds a particularly balanced expression in Werbner's contribution. Problems of ethnic and cultural pluralism, already referred to in connection with Devisch's and Fabian's papers, provide a meaningful starting-point for the analysis of transformations in religious movements in South Central Africa. Thus Werbner organizes his argument around the themes of strangerhood and estrangement. He performs his analysis mainly with a view to explaining the different spatial or locational imageries used in a number of Zimbabwean independent churches. His argument is that the spatial images used by

these various movements are systematically related to certain changes in the wider social field and that, moreover, they may be regarded as systematic transformations (rather in the non-structuralist sense defined above) of each other. In an earlier publication relative to West African cults Werbner had already argued, to use his own epigrammatic phrase, that 'religion and strangerhood transform together' (Werbner, 1979). In the Zimbabwean case (characterized not – as in the West African case – by the confrontation between a dominant white elite and a subjugated black population in the process of proletarianization) the argument is rather that religion and *estrangement* transform together. He argues his point in a complex manner by showing that the images themselves are in an argument with each other. And he furthermore shows that these images relate to such other dimensions of religious movements as consciousness, project and organization.

Although Werbner puts his argument quite convincingly, building upon and adding to the work of Horton, Fernandez, Eliade, Daneel and others, not every reader will be convinced by his use of terms like framed and unframed person (that is, set apart from or included among the rest of mankind), focused and non-focused space, or by the inferences he draws from their combinations. Thus focused space and framed person are both seen as representations of cosmos (order), and where the two are combined there is harmony. Where they are not combined, as in the Wilderness Church, there is disharmony. One wonders how to qualify another non-combination as in the mission churches. There, space is focused but the person is unframed. Should that also be disharmony? The problem is not so much any internal inconsistency of Werbner's argument, but the fact that the problems at hand are so complex, and our theories and methods still so inadequate, that an ambitious attempt like this could not very well be expected to be completed successfully at this stage, even when it can rest upon the author's profound knowledge of South Central African religion, and his extensive theoretical work in the field of regional cults.

Ranger, Buijtenhuijs and Coulon

Whereas Werbner tries to go all the way on his own, developing a somewhat idiosyncratic approach to symbolic and social structure

in the field of Zimbabwean religion, the contributions which the remaining three papers have to make to the general theme of this book are more specific and easier to situate, since all three deal with well-defined aspects of sociopolitical structure building upon a well-defined body of recent literature in the field. Ranger reviews his data on the twentieth-century Mwari cult in Zimbabwe in the light of on-going discussions concerning this cult in itself (Ranger, 1967; 1979b; Werbner, 1977; Daneel, 1970a), more comprehensive approaches that have stressed the element of 'ecological concern' in Central African religion (Ranger, 1973; Schoffeleers, 1979), and finally the decline of that concern in the face of peasantization and proletarianization (van Binsbergen, 1981; Ranger, 1978). Buijtenhuijs assesses the extent to which the Dini ya Msambwa movement in Kenya could be regarded as a political protest movement (Wipper, 1977), or alternatively should be treated as an expression of class conflict or, again, as a 'counter-society' in terms of Baechler's theories (Baechler, 1970). Coulon discusses militant charismatic Islamic movements in Senegal at the time of the imposition of French colonial rule, and against the prevailing interpretation in terms of a primary anti-colonial resistance movement advocates a view that comes close to Buijtenhuijs's and Baechler's.

Ranger notes a number of prohibitions issued by the Mwari organization against the selling of agricultural produce by villagers, and against the purchase of European goods. Seeking to explain these prohibitions he first applies the idea of ecological concern: Mwari's admonitions might have to do with the husbanding and proper management of natural resources within an eco-system whose functioning could still be considered to be unaffected by the inroads of capitalism. However, one penetrates deeper into the power relations that underlie this 'ecological' concern (as represented by the claims of priests, chiefs, elders, in the domains of production and circulation, but also in the political and moral aspects of life) if one views the data in the light of an approach stressing the articulation of modes of production. Thus peasantization and proletarianization, as results of the articulation between the capitalist mode of production and pre-existing non-capitalist ones, might form the proper context in which to interpret the Mwari stance. Ranger argues that the prohibitions protect an internally complex 'communal' mode of production[32] and particularly the tributary mode inherent in the latter. The Mwari cult provides the ideological legitimation for chiefly tribute, and also by other means underwrites chiefly privileges. Thus the Mwari prohibitions serve to protect the non-capitalist modes of production against an encroaching capitalism. But which aspect of capitalist penetration? A more precise answer becomes possible when the evidence is put into a chronological sequence. The cult did not try to ward off the peasantization process: in the first decade of the twentieth century, when African peasants in Zimbabwe prospered, no prohibitions were issued from the shrines. Rather, the cult tried to keep the peasants from proletarianization, i.e. from a state where, divorced from their means of (rural) production, they would have become dependent upon a money income earned in the labour market. Curbing this process, the Mwari cult tries to keep the peasantry viable. Ranger argues thus that, like the Lumpa Church in van Binsbergen's (1981: chs 1, 8) analysis, the Mwari cult is one of the mechanisms by which people try to restore and maintain Central African peasant society.

This type of analysis convincingly argues the potential of class analysis for studies of African religion. While emphasis is here on peasants and proletarians, a different type of class analysis has long since been applied in this field: the role of the world religions in the formation of African elites constitutes a relatively well-studied topic.[33] It is therefore somewhat surprising that Buijtenhuijs in his discussion of Dini ya Msambwa wholly dismisses the idea of a class analysis of this religious movement. Adopting a narrow concept of class (in which poverty is emphasized, rather than a specific position within the system of relations of production), Buijtenhuijs argues that class *difference* cannot explain why certain people adopt a primarily religious response (such as Dini ya Msambwa), while others take to a political party: for all people involved in his analysis are poor and uneducated rural Africans. Buijtenhuijs certainly has a point here, but he overlooks other major analytical problems. Once we accept that people's experience as members of a class may and often does take on a religious expression, we have not only to explain the religious nature of that expression (a problem on which Buijtenhuijs seems to concentrate); we must also trace (like Ranger and perhaps also Werbner do in their contributions) the transformations between a class

situation as defined in political-economy terms, and the form and content of its religious expression. It is the latter type of analysis in terms of class that Buijtenhuijs's study of Dini ya Msambwa fails to offer. The alternative he proposes for Wipper's reductionist analysis in terms of political protest (whose shortcomings Buijtenhuijs exposes convincingly) is in terms of the concept of the 'counter-society', a response to rapid social change and anomie: under those conditions certain religious groups may renounce all power aspirations in the hostile wider society but instead retreat (in terms of organization but particularly of beliefs, moral codes, ritual) to 'a place to feel at home'. Political parties, on the other hand, would react first and foremost to political and economic oppression and aim at gaining political power.

Buijtenhuijs critically builds upon such academic theoreticians of African protest as Balandier (1963, 1971, 1976) and Ranger (1968). Coulon presents a thesis similar to Buijtenhuijs's, but his frame of reference is the attempts, by Senegalese *politicians*, to impose a particular interpretation (that of anti-colonial protest) upon Islamic charismatic movements in nineteenth-century Senegal.[34] Coulon argues convincingly that these movements were attempts on the part of the disprivileged, the poor and the landless, to reconstruct a new viable environment. Islamic ideas (e.g. the concept of the Islamic community, the concept of retreat – *hejira* – and the status accorded to Christians) stimulated the creation of a counter-society that was far more retreatist-Muslim in its outlook than it was anti-colonialist. Ultimately, this counter-society evolved into a hegemonic apparatus which today exercises control over a civil society that political society fails to organize, or does not want to organize. Thus Coulon's argument touches on a topic which has been prominent in African religious studies: the relation between religion and the state.[35]

The ideal-typical counter-society as sketched in Buijtenhuijs's paper will certainly ring a bell with some of us who have had first-hand experience with African religious movements, e.g. of the Zionist type. However, one may well hesitate to adopt Baechler's concept as long as its systematic theoretical status remains in the air, and its connections with more familiar concepts of proved analytical power (e.g. class, class conflict, transformation, contradiction) are not made explicit. The superior analytical usefulness of the concept of counter-society remains to be established,

particularly the distinction between counter-society and revolutionary protest movement remains shady. The ultimate test seems to lie in the historical outcome of either movement, which renders the argument circular. Application of the counter-society concept to the various religious movements as analysed in Werbner's paper; the Mwari prohibitions as discussed by Ranger; the familiar phenomenon of routinized, encapsulated rural Watchtower communities which, in present-day South Central Africa, form the cinders of the Watchtower effervescence of the 1920s and 1930s;[36] or to the Zambian Lumpa Church, would probably lead to the conclusion that Baechler's concept is incapable of accounting for the full range of religious responses. 'Re-contextualization' of counter-society analysis in terms of class and power seems required at this stage. Particularly, the transition, as described by Coulon, from counter-society to hegemonic apparatus that is intimately associated with the modern state in Senegal suggests that counter-societies retain more potential for subsequent growth, transformation, and accumulation of power than Buijtenhuijs's treatment (in terms of retirement to 'a place to feel at home') may suggest. More generally, the underlying theoretical question is: what happens to religious movements (be they counter-societies, messianic cults, witchcraft eradication campaigns, etc.) once the initial conditions that generated them disappear? How is their symbolic idiom carried over into an altered social, political and economic structure, and how is it transformed in the process?

However, Buijtenhuijs's and Coulon's contributions, which shrink from over-contextualizing African religious movements, both come from scholars with remarkable skill and experience in analysing political, social and economic structures. Their relativism *vis-à-vis* social-structural contextualization should therefore be taken seriously, even if it is clear that certain theoretical and methodological problems receive little explicit attention in their arguments.

5 Conclusion

In this introduction it has been argued that the present collection of papers has a contribution to make to African religious studies. The book is firmly situated in two of the several major debates that

dominate the field today. However, it is proper to remind ourselves of the fact that vast portions of this field have remained out of view – some deliberately, others rather by accident or because of the systematic impact of a sociology of knowledge from which the production of scholarly views on African religion cannot escape any more than any other human intellectual activity. Let us briefly review some of these blind-spots as they are likely to suggest new steps to be taken, in empirical research, and in theorizing.

Students of African religion are relatively few in number, and they tend to work somewhat outside the mainstream of their disciplines – be these anthropology, sociology, history, political science, or theology. As scholars we have a vested interest in the persistence of our chosen subject. The emphasis on social, political and economic structure, as in this book, may well reflect the attempt, among our small and relatively close-knit academic community, to render our activities less esoteric and more immediately relevant in the eyes of colleagues working on class formation, economic history, or pastoral theology; and thus to safeguard the institutional and financial bases of our research activities. In this light it is significant that two questions about African religion have very rarely received explicit discussion: not only the question of *fieldwork* (which would painfully reflect on the validity and reliability of our data, and force us to consider our own conceptual and emotional projections onto African religion); but also that of *secularization* – which would remind us equally painfully of the possibility that our chosen subject, in contrast to the supernatural beings around which it revolves, may not live on for ever, while some Africans might take their religion less seriously than we do. Both problems are virtually ignored in the present volume, and that is nothing to congratulate ourselves on.

Contributors to this book range from agnostics (most of whom are first-generation), through actual adherents of world religions, to active Christian clerics. There is little to suggest that this book suffers from the biases of what Robin Horton (1975: pp.394f.) has called the 'devout opposition': scholars whose research on African religion is not free from the apologetic intention of furthering the world religion to which they themselves happen to adhere. Yet one wonders how different a book would have emerged if more of the contributors had been adherents of Islam, of autochthonous

African religions, of world religions hailing from South or East Asia, or had come from a long-established agnostic background (cf. Robins, 1973).

We decided to concentrate on the theory and methodology of African religious research, and to exclude that portion of the conference papers that had a more or less theological orientation. This meant that we could not touch here on a number of topics that have been prominent in the field for decades: world religions; the organization sociology of modern African religious bodies; the interrelations of these organizations (the problem of independency); the ideological and political relations between these religious organizations and African states. Each of these topics could have been chosen as a focus for the development of useful confluence approaches to symbolic and social structure. By accident and preference rather than for any systematic reasons other topics were chosen. However, much can be expected from further application of the tentative insights emerging from the present volume into these and a myriad other topics: e.g. power and terror in relation to African religion – a topic which also has to do with chieftainship and secret societies; marriage; morality; life crisis ceremonies; the emergence of national cultures in Africa; the ethnic embeddedness of world religions; the therapeutic effectiveness of African religion; African philosophy and Black theology; witchcraft and sorcery; and finally the problem of the unit of study, in the face of African religion's potential to buttress (as in ancestral and chiefly cults) but also to cross national, ethnic and class boundaries.

Finally, it has turned out that we have produced a volume whose contributors in at least two characteristics show significantly little overlap with the subjects of our researches: none of our contributors is African, and none is a woman. At the level of abstraction that is maintained in this collection, this state of affairs may not have led to dramatic distortions. Yet one may wonder whether the problematics pursued here would not have been taken a decisive step further if our African, and female, colleagues had joined in our efforts – drawing upon their own significant contributions to the subject, and exposing our limitations in the process. Let it suffice to say that this double blind-spot was not created intentionally, that we made efforts to avoid it, and accept responsibility for our failure to do so.

Few colleagues will perceive the limitations of this collection, both in scope and in depth, more keenly than we do as editors. Our contributors must not be offended at the extent to which we have taken them to task in the course of this introduction. We have expressed our doubts as to the possibility of a study of African religion that is more than a projection of the concerns of a North Atlantic intellectual subculture. The only way to alleviate that doubt is by honest, accumulative, painstaking intellectual debate; and to such debate we mean this book to contribute.

Notes

1 We are indebted to T. O. Ranger for his permission to incorporate in this introduction some of the ideas expressed in his closing address at the 1979 Leiden conference; to J. M. Nchabeleng for bibliographical research undertaken for this introductory chapter; to Mrs A. Kuyt, our fellow-member of the Organizing Committee, for attending to the logistics of the conference; to the secretarial staff of the African Studies Centre, the staff of the Eysingahuis Conference Hall, G. Grootenhuis (general secretary of the African Studies Centre), and J. Nijssen (bursar of the African Studies Centre) for services and moral support without which the 1979 conference and the present book would never have materialized; to Jocelyn Murray for her assistance in copy-editing; and to Ria van Hal for typing this introduction and several other chapters.

2 Martinus Daneel, Robert Buijtenhuijs and Wim van Binsbergen were (and with the exception of Daneel, still are) researchers at the African Studies Centre; Matthew Schoffeleers was a member of the board of the African Studies Centre until 1981. Cf. Daneel (1970a; 1970b; 1971; 1974), Buijtenhuijs (1971; 1973; 1978), van Binsbergen and Buijtenhuijs (1976), van Binsbergen (1980; 1981), Schoffeleers (1972; 1975; 1978; 1979), Schoffeleers and Linden (1972), Schoffeleers and van der Veer (1981).

3 For excellent surveys, cf. Ajayi and Ayandele (1974), Fernandez (1978).

4 E.g. de Craemer *et al.* (1976), MacGaffey (1972), Schoffeleers (1979), van Binsbergen (1981).

5 Cf. Horton (1971; 1975), Wilson (1971), van Binsbergen (1981).

6 Cf. Singleton (1977), Ilogu (1974), Bond *et al.* (1979), Linden (1974; 1977), Daneel (1971; 1974), Peel (1968), H. W. Turner (1979b).

7 Cf. V. W. Turner (1969; 1974), M. Douglas (1970; 1978; 1982).

8 Cf. Fernandez (1964; 1966; 1978), MacGaffey (1972; 1977a; 1977b), Janzen (1971; 1978), Janzen and MacGaffey (1974), Fabian (1971; 1979; 1981), Jules-Rosette (1975; 1978; 1979).

9 Cf. Mbiti (1969), Idowu (1973), Mulago (1977), and other African researchers participating in the 1978 International Colloquium at Kinshasa – cf. Colloque International (n.d.).

10 Cf. Bonte (1975), Lebulu (1979), Lubeck (1980), Schoffeleers (1978), Bloch (1971), Godelier (1975), van Binsbergen (1981), Augé (1977; 1979), Terray (1978), Muller (1978).

11 H. W. Turner (1979a), van Binsbergen (1979), revised and expanded as chapter 1 of van Binsbergen (1981), Droogers (this volume, ch. 4).

12 Schoffeleers, Janzen, this volume, chs 6, 8.

13 Fernandez (1979).

14 Bureau (1979), Devisch, de Mahieu, this volume chs 2, 3.

15 Ngokwey (1979), Werbner (this volume, ch. 9).

16 Ranger (1979a), Dozon (1979), de Wolf (1979), Buijtenhuijs (this volume, ch. 11).

17 Verstraelen (1979), Pirouet (1979), Sundkler (1979), Hastings (1979a).

18 For similar views, cf. Vidal (1978), Ryan (1978).

19 For the concept of transformation, see pp. 20–1.

20 For similar views, cf. Jules-Rosette (1978), Bauer and Hinnant (1980).

21 Fabian's omission on this point may not be unrelated to the following peculiarity: he illustrates his 'ethnographic' approach with data that would not appear to be eminently 'ethnographic' to those of us who tend to associate the anthropological exercise primarily with participation and observation – i.e. with behaviour and interaction which involve more than words alone. Fabian's argument takes its cue from what is essentially a verbal document, in which people tell a stereotyped story featuring characters with allegorical names. How would the 'ethnographic' approach, and any fieldworker seeking to apply it, stand up to participants' ritual actions in real life?

22 Cf. Douglas (1954; 1963), Colson (1962; 1969), V. W. Turner (1957; 1967; 1968).

23 Cf. Augé (1975; 1977; 1979), Bourdieu (1977; 1979), Lacroix (1979), Muller (1978), Baré (1977), Terray (1978).

24 For an attempt to take up this point, cf. van Binsbergen (1981: ch. 1, especially pp. 54–65, 73–4).

25 E.g. Evans-Pritchard (1937), V. W. Turner (1975), Junod (1927).

26 Further elements for such an aesthetic approach could be gleaned from Biebuyck (1973), Zuesse (1978), Bloch (1974), Beattie (1977), V. W. Turner (1962; 1975).

27 Cf. Marwick (1950), Redmayne (1970), Devanges (1977), Leeson and Frankenberg (1977).

28 Beyond this at least two further problems could be fruitfully investigated: first, the basis and mechanisms of therapeutic power in African religions (cf. Piault (1975), Janzen (1978), Ademuwagun *et al.* (1979)). Second, what about the relation between mediumistic and shamanistic divination? The former type (in which the diviner is locally considered to be entered or possessed by an external, invisible revelatory agent) appears to be historically prevalent in Africa. Shamanistic divination (following an emic model according to which the diviner goes on a spiritual, visionary quest, from which he returns

with his revelations) is a rarer phenomenon in Africa. The shamanistic elements, however, as found in the biographies of a considerable number of twentieth-century religious innovators in, for example, South Central Africa (including John Maranke, Alice Lenshina, Mupumani, Chana, Simbinga; cf. van Binsbergen, 1981: p. 147 and *passim*, and sources mentioned there) would suggest that shamanistic divination is on the increase, particularly in a context of interaction between traditional African religion and Christianity. However, much more research is required on this point.

29 Or should we read Droogers's 'waste-making' metaphor of North Atlantic intellectual production as a critique of the hidden capitalist foundations of African religious studies? Should we, in line with such writers as Copans (1974; 1975), Asad (1973), Leclerc (1972), 'autocritically' denounce our intellectual efforts as an ideological response of late capitalism or neo-imperialism? The question is far from rhetorical, and in fact reflects a view which our African colleagues argued passionately at the 1979 conference.

30 Kuper (1979), Ranger (1982), Waardenburg (1979), Gellner (1981), van Binsbergen (1980).

31 Like Fabian, Janzen presents the reader with an idiosyncratic use of the familiar term 'ethnographic'. Fabian (cf. *infra*. pp. 145f.) means by this term a very specific stance on the part of researchers of African religion; he offers detailed prescriptions as to how this stance should be arrived at. By 'ethnographic genre' Janzen means simply locally produced texts which describe aspects of the local culture and society and which thus could be termed folk ethnographics.

32 The term 'communal mode of production' is somewhat unusual in the conceptual range available within present-day Marxist approaches (cf. Kahn and Llobera, 1980; van Binsbergen and Geschiere, in press). Within the social formation of Zimbabwe in the second half of the nineteenth century (cf. Beach, 1977), one would prefer to distinguish, more explicitly than Ranger does, between two articulated modes of production: a domestic mode at the level of local village communities, and a tributary mode revolving on surplus extraction from these communities for the benefit of chiefly courts.

33 The impact of world religions is a regular topic in the many studies of elite formation in Africa; among many works, we mention Ajayi (1965), Ayandele (1966) and some contributions in Fasholé-Luke *et al.* (1978). Besides Ranger's and van Binsbergen's work referred to in the text, references to the religious aspects of proletarianization and peasantization are relatively few, while theorizing in this field is still in an incipient stage; scattered material can be gleaned from Cohen (1980), van Onselen (1976: pp. 204–9), Lubeck (1975: pp. 180–200, 256–60; 1980), Sandbrook and Arn (1977: pp. 49–56, 64–66), Kiernan (1977). We are indebted to P. Konings for suggestions on this point.

34 There is a parallel here with Malawi, where the figure of John Chilembwe became a symbol in the hands of nationalist politicians, to be reassessed by academic historians stressing the non-political,

symbolic overtones in Chilembwe's message of the 'New Jerusalem'; cf. Shepperson and Price (1958), Linden and Linden (1971).

35 E.g. Fasholé-Luke *et al.* (1978), Hastings (1979b), Mazrui (1973), Levtzion (1971), Cruise O'Brien (1975).

36 Cf. de Mahieu (1976), Cross (1970; 1977), Long (1968), Martin (1980).

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