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IS AFRICA INCURABLY RELIGIOUS? CONFESSING AND CONTESTING AN INVENTION OF TRADITION

Africans have been called incurably religious.[1]

Okot p'Bitek was the first African scholar of religions to challenge the myth that Africa is incurably religious. He battled it in the sixties and early seventies. Until recently, however**,** he was the only African scholar of religions to oppose it, for no other African scholars of religions did not question it.[2] So, the myth grew ever more powerful. Only lately, a few other dissenting voices have begun to be heard. The myth, its explanation, p'Bitek's opposition to it, and recent evidence against it are examined in this article.

Our essay has the following structure. The source of this myth is discussed first. We locate it in the 'religionism' of African Christian liberal theologians examining the native religions of Africa in Christianising ways at the time of Africa's transition from colonialism to independence. John Mbiti was the foremost of them, but he was not its founder. We discuss his 'precursors' first, then Mbiti's contribution, and briefly refer to other contributors. In part two, the myth is then shown to fit the terms of the theory of the 'invention of tradition'. More precisely, it is a masterful counter-invention against the numerous European 'inventions of Africa', from classical times till now.[3] In the third part, Okot p'Bitek's polemic against this construct is reviewed. In the concluding section, we summarise recent evidence against the myth along two lines: as found in the indigenous religions themselves – the line pioneered by p'Bitek; and as found in modern Africans – a development that was exemplified in p'Bitek's biography.

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1 Parrinder 1969: 235. Cf. also Busia (1967: 1, 4, 7, 9). Cf. also Pobee & Ositelu II (1998: 9): 'The African is a radically religious person, religious at the core of his or her being. Africans' communal activities and their social institutions are inextricably bound up with the spirit world. […] Africans seem unable to explain life and its mysteries without some reference to the supernatural'.

2 Jean-Marc Éla was the first to suggest, in 1985, that this 'pretension' ought, perhaps, to be 'demystified' (Metogo 1997: 8-9). The claim that 'the African is by nature religious' was opposed as 'invalid', 'unacceptable', 'erroneous', based on 'unsound logic and uncritical and partial examination of facts', and as a 'theological misappropriation' as early as 1973 by Joshua N. Kudadjie (1973: 32-33, 36, 38, 43, 46-48; 1975; 1976: 62, 65-67, 71-72). But he did so as a moral philosopher, that is on grounds of logic, and only in relation to the claim that the morality of African societies was completely religiously inspired because it was exclusively, totally and necessarily based on their indigenous religions.

3 Cf. Mudimbe 1988: 69-72, *passim*

MBITI'S RELIGIONISM

Precursors

We have not yet been able to establish which scholar of the religions of Africa, African or European, first formulated the view that Africans are 'incurably religious'. So, we have also not yet been able to establish the origin of **[124]** this myth, nor investigate the evidence on which it was founded it, and by what argument, and for what ideological motives, its inventor promoted it.

However, views emphasising the pervasive religiosity of African 'traditional societies' and proposing a unified, pan-African view of it began to circulate in liberal theological circles, Protestant and Roman Catholic, certainly as early – or perhaps only as late – as the decade of Africa's de-colonisation, 1957-1966, in particular in West Africa. They were clearly in tune with, and part of, other 'revitalisations' of newly independent Africa, such as Senghor's *négritude*, Nkrumah's African Personality, the 'black is beautiful' and 'back to the roots' ideologies, the new African literature, the political optimism of the decade, and its pan-African hopes and dreams.[4]

In Ghana, the view that African traditional societies had always been through-and-through religious, was promoted in that decade by Willy E. Abraham, professor of Philosophy in the University of Ghana, at Legon, in his *The Mind of Africa*, published in 1962. He was also a fervent advocate of Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism and 'African Personality', as well as of 'centralised socialism' and one-party states.[5] As a philosopher, he defended an 'essentialist' view of 'African culture'.[6] Postulating that African cultures were sufficiently similar for one of them, that of the Akan of Ghana, to be taken as 'paradigmatic' of them all,[7] he argued that it could be demonstrated convincingly that 'African culture' was pervasively religious by an analysis of the 'Akan metaphysic'.[8] In that worldview, he wrote, spirit takes the first place, for nature, the state, and man are all spiritual,[9] and the temporal and the non-temporal are fused.[10] He also presented Akan traditional religion as basically monotheist by viewing the 'minor gods' as 'artificial means to the bounty of Onyame [God]',[11] thereby explaining its marked polytheism away. They were, he said, merely 'portions of God's virtue and power sent to men for their speedy comfort through the exclusive intervention of the priests who are also their guardians'.[12] Akan spirit possession – another prominent trait of Akan religion –, he regarded as evidently 'a superstitious corruption of the relationship between man and God', and as an 'arrant blasphemy'.[13]

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4 Cf. e.g. Pernot 1965b: 116. For further background on this 'post-primitive period', cf. also Mudimbe 1988: 60-61, 77-79, 145-153.

5 Abraham 1970[4] (1962[1]): 10, 36-37, 115, 144-147, 153, 176, 182, 186, 193, 193-202

6 Abraham 1970: 42-43

7 Cf. also Abraham (1970: 115) 'For the unity of African cultures, it is sufficient that the [paradigmatic] cultural complex should occur in sufficient areas in negro Africa'. Cf. Metogo 1997: 11-12 for a methodological critique of this comparative methodology ignoring and erasing the differences between African societies.

8 Abraham 1970: 46-47

9 Abraham: 1970: 50-51

10 Abraham 1970: 52

11 Abraham 1970: 56

12 Abraham 1970: 56

13 Abraham 1970: 57-58

[125] Similar views were voiced during the two *Rencontres internationales* in the Benedictine monastery at Bouaké in the Ivory Coast in January and October 1962. In these conferences, RC priests and theologians,[14] and African scholars, civil servants and politicians met with French anthropologists to discuss *la mentalité religieuse africaine*. In tune with the newly acquired political independence, the standard colonial terminology in respect of the indigenous religions of Africa was clearly embarrassing[15] to the participants, as it was obviously inspired by Western religious ethnocentrism.[16] Pejorative labels, such as 'savage fetishism', 'primitive animism', 'totemism', 'ridiculous superstition', 'conjuring magic', and 'black magic', 'paganism', 'idolatry', 'false gods', 'satanic entities', 'polytheism', etc., were nearly all regretted and resolutely abrogated.[17] The participants admitted that older Western scholars had failed to take their own beliefs, prejudices and categories into account in their study of the indigenous religions of Africa.[18] They had imposed concepts upon African native religions that were foreign to them, because **[126]** they had not studied them from the point of view of their believers,[19] nor in the context of their cultures[20] and societies.[21] One participant suggested that Africans – and he implied that only Africans – should be trained to research them, for they had been raised in them and knew them 'from the inside'.[22]

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[14] The Roman Catholic priests kept quiet most of the time, however, for two reasons, as one of them later explained. One was that they felt they were not competent to discuss the native religions of Africa. The other was that they were upset by the 'misrepresentation' of (European) Christianity by the anthropologists equating it with the 'Christian fetishes' of popular piety, such as medals, ten pence for Saint Anthony, and litanies. In the view of the priests, these 'deformations' had 'nothing to do with the living God', even though they conceded that these 'degraded forms of religion' might serve as 'roads towards the truth' for some Christians. They also regarded the African-Christian syncretistic religions, discussed by Verger and Bascom, as 'adulterations' of authentic Christianity, and as totally 'incompatible with faith in the unique God' (Nielly 1965; Pernot 1965b: 137).

[15] Cf. Pernot 1965b: 87

[16] Cf. Maquet 1965: 59-60

[17] Pernot 1965a: 97, 99-100, 101-102, 103; 1965b: 44, 87, 114, 131, 136, 171; Paulme 1965: 13, 15, 18; Hampaté Ba 1965: 33; Verger 1965: 97-99, 104; Bascom 1965: 122; Leiris 1965: 174-175, 177. Hampaté Ba (1965: 33), however, regarded animism as 'the more proper and less depreciatory' term and continued to use it as a label for African indigenous religions in his contribution, and to term their gods 'fetishes', as did Himmelheber (1965: 76, 78, 80, 82-83). During the discussions, participants continued to use the terms 'animist religion', 'animist societies', 'African animist', 'animist temples', 'animist priests', and 'fetish priest' (Pernot 1965b: 45, 51, 53, 55, 68, 74, 86, 106, 117, 118, 128, 136, 166, 185; Verger 1965: 103).

[18] Cf. Pernot 1965b: 25

[19] Cf. Maquet 1965: 63; Pernot 1965b: 23-24, 27, 29, 108; Bascom 1965: 122, 123

[20] Pernot 1965b: 26-27

[21] Pernot 1965b: 28-29. Maquet (1965: 64-66) stressed the mutual integration of religions and societies, and the big changes ahead for African traditional religions because Africa would be industrialised in the post-colonial period. He was optimistic that they would be able to maintain their identity in the transformations ahead, for they were very African, less intellectualised than Christianity and Islam, and had proved adaptive and adoptive. Bascom (1965: 121-122, 127) was sure that they could survive in the modern Africa of tomorrow, but not whether they would indeed survive in the end. Verger (1965: 99-101) and Bascom (1965: 123-127) also stressed their tolerance, and their vitality in Brazil, Cuba and elsewhere, as syncretic religions of spirit possession in which West African gods were identified, and completely fused, with RC saints. Other participants, however, feared that only 'superstitious vestiges' of African indigenous religions, such as the belief in amulets, would remain among Africa's uprooted intellectuals, and folklore (Pernot 1965b: 66-67, 69-74, 114, 116-117; Verger 1965: 105).

[22] Pernot1965b: 29-31. This was stressed by the Nigerian Anglican scholar E.C.O. Ilogu, who regarded the study of African indigenous religions primarily as a means towards the indigenisation of (mission) Christianity in Africa, and their (partial) survival within it (Pernot 1965b: 72-73, 114, 116-117).

Those gathered at Bouaké stated emphatically, that the beliefs of Africans constituted real religions,[23] and not 'magic', even when they engaged in witch-hunts.[24] Many participants in these two conferences also regarded the gods and ancestors as mere intermediaries between men and God, without intrinsic power of their own, and viewed African indigenous religions as basically monotheist belief systems.[25] In addition, they regarded them as pervasive **[127]** and moral religions.[26] In brief, they were 'a faith as solid as a rock',[27] and Africa's 'spiritual patrimony'.[28] So, atheism seemed impossible in traditional African society.[29]

A third precursor is K.A. Busia. He maintained that 'Africa's own cultural heritage […] is intensely and pervasively religious'; that 'in the cultural heritage of Africa, […] religion […] cannot be divorced from politics, or philosophy, or economics. African religious concepts involve the whole universe'. Therefore, 'in traditional African communities, it was not possible to distinguish between religious and non-religious areas of life. All life was religious'. And: 'the supernatural powers and deities operate in every sphere and activity of life [among African communities]. Religion and life are inseparable [in them], and life is not comparted into sacred and secular'.[30]

Mbiti's view

Mbiti shared this unitary view of the pervasive religiosity of 'African traditional society'. He never used the set phrase 'Africans are incurably religious', but wrote that they were reputed to be 'notoriously religious',[31] and asserted that they deserve this reputation, for they had traditionally been, and still were, 'deeply religious', lived in 'a religious universe', and possessed 'a religious ontology'.[32] He claimed that 'religion permeates all the departments of life [in African societies] so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it'.[33] Moreover, he added, 'religion is the strongest element in traditional background and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and

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[23] Pernot 1965a: 50, 97, 98, 99-101, 103; Paulme 1965; Maquet 1965; Verger 1965: 98.

[24] Pernot 1965b: 19-22, 24

[25] Pernot 1965a: 94, 98, 100-101, 102, 103-104; 1965b: 23, 45,47, 48-49, 128-129, 130-131; Hampaté Ba: 1965: 33-35, 37-38, 43. Some participants insisted, however, that the gods did not merely 'replace God' and did have powers of their own (Pernot 1965a: 104; 1965b: 49-50; 1965b: 34, 43-44, 86, 87, 131), 'without any reference to God' (Himmelheber 1965: 82). They held that African polytheism could not be reduced to merely 'the manifestation of attributes of God' (Pernot 1965a: 105), or to one of the other christianising explanations, which several participants proposed in their eagerness to include African indigenous religions into their (monotheistic) definition of religion. Maquet (1965: 60) also pointed to the Christian-monotheist bias in the publications on African indigenous religions by missionaries trained in Wilhelm Schmidt's theory of primitive monotheism. Bascom (1965: 123) defined Yoruba religion as 'polytheist in belief and fundamentally monotheist in practice', because 'each Yoruba [believer] worships but one *orisha*'. Leiris (1965: 176-178; Pernot 1965b: 180-186, 188) held that African religious statues were believed to serve as the temporary dwelling, and incarnation, of the spiritual beings they expressed during the rituals in their honour. By serving as their receptacles, the statues constituted their 'real presence' for their believers.

[26] Pernot 1965a: 94-95, 101, 111; 1965b: 45-46, 47-48, 51-55, 70; Hampaté Ba 1965: 38-42, 43; Bascom 1965: 124

[27] Hampaté Ba 1965: 42

[28] Verger 1965: 98, 104

[29] Pernot 1965a: 96-97. Cf. also Metogo (1997: 148) on *l'assurance compacte* ('dense certainty') that atheism could not be squared with 'the Negro mentality and soul'.

[30] Busia 1967: 1, 4, 7, 9

[31] Mbiti 1969: 1; 1975: 27

[32] Mbiti 1969: 1, 15, 262; 1975: 27, 198; cf. also Kudadjie 1976: 71-72

[33] Mbiti 1969: 1

living of the people concerned'.[34] Africans, therefore, were religious beings: 'It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being'.[35] And again:

> For Africans, [religion] is an ontological phenomenon; it pertains to the question of existence or being. […] Within traditional life, the individual is immersed in a religious participation, which starts before birth and continues after death. For him, therefore, and for the larger community of which he is part, to live is to be caught up in a religious drama. This is fundamental, for it means that man lives in a religious universe. Both that world and practically all his activities in it, are seen and experienced through a religious understanding and meaning. […] The point here is that for Africans, the whole of existence is a religious **[128]** phenomenon; man is a deeply religious being living in a religious universe. […] Africans have their own ontology, but it is religious ontology.[36]

Because that ontology made 'their life a profoundly religious phenomenon', Mbiti feels that he must 'treat religion as an ontological phenomenon', something that 'pertains to the question of existence or being'.[37] Mbiti regretted that research into the indigenous religions of Africa had been the preserve of anthropologists and sociologists so far: 'practically nothing has been produced by theologians, describing and interpreting these religions theologically'.[38]

The source

These quotations establish that Mbiti's comparative study of the native religions of Africa was founded on the 'religionist' paradigm in the academic study of religions, developed since the 19th century in Protestant liberal, inclusive theologies of religions, which took the *homo religiosus* position that humans are religious 'by nature'. This proposition can neither be verified nor falsified, and constitutes, therefore, an extra-scientific position of a theological nature. It asserts that the invisible world(s), beings and qualities, postulated by religions as active agents within the empirical realm, do actually exist and do govern the mundane affairs of humans. 'Religionist' scholars of religions, therefore, also hold that it is 'normal' for humans and human societies to be religious, and often also that humans are equipped with some faculty for the apperception, or experience, of the unseen. Some of them also maintain that it is crucial for humans to retain, or regain, religion.[39] Irreligion, or unbelief, would not only severely affect the moral and mental health of humans, but also spell doom for humankind, if it became as massive as it is now in secularising modern Western societies.[40]

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[34] Mbiti 1969: 1
[35] Mbiti 1969: 3
[36] Mbiti 1969: 15
[37] Mbiti 1969: 14, 262
[38] Mbiti 1969: 1
[39] Cf. Platvoet 1994: 27-37, for these and other marks of religionist scholarship in religions, and for examples of it in Anglophone Africa and North America.
[40] The view that irreligion will spell humanity's doom is Eliade's in his chapter 4 on 'The Terror of History' in Eliade 1954. He insisted that it is, therefore, also incumbent on scholars of religions to reconvert modern secular men to religion through 'creative hermeneutics' (Eliade 1969: 1-12; 54-71). Cf. also Rennie (1996: 89-108) on Eliade's opposition of archaic man's religious 'ontology', in which actual history is time and again 'abolished' by the ritual re-creation of primordial time, *versus* modern man's apocalyptic condition by his lack of an 'ontology of the imaginary'.

[129] When Mbiti asserted that Africans have 'a religious ontology', he was using religionist idiom to affirm the liberal theological – and meta-Christian – position that the unseen realms, postulated by religions, do really exist, have always affected the empirical world of Africans, and that Africans have always responded religiously to them. It follows that pre-colonial African societies must have always been religious, in however minimal and imperfect manners, for it would contradict *homo religiosus* theology, if Africans and African societies had been irreligious. Irreligious African societies would have been abnormal and unnatural.

Praeparatio evangelica

Actually, though Mbiti held that Africans were 'immersed in religious participation' from before birth till after death,[41] he found several grievous shortcomings in African indigenous religions. One was that they were 'pragmatic and utilitarian' and 'extremely anthropocentric', and had 'little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life'.[42] Another was that they did not picture God 'in an ethical-spiritual relationship with man'.[43] And a third that Africans only knew the present and a long past – 'the graveyard of time' – but 'virtually no future'.[44] African religions, therefore, lacked eschatology. They cultivated 'no messianic hope or apocalyptic vision with God stepping in at some future time to bring about a radical reversal of man's normal life'.[45]

In the final analysis, Mbiti found African indigenous religions, therefore, defective. They were to be regarded only as *praeparatio evangelica*, stepping-stones towards the one true, or at least the best, religion for Africa: Christianity. Moreover, in colonial time, Africa had become 'the big religious cauldron', and 'the dumping heap of the religions of mankind'. As a result, much 'religious concubinage' took place, especially 'between Christianity and traditional religions'.[46] Mbiti rejected this syncretism as mere 'religious convenience [… with] no depth and shape', and as 'religious laziness provid[ing] an escape from facing the full demands of the religions involved in that kind of concubinage'.[47] This new 'religious turbulence', he argued, had severely shaken the 'foundations of existence and sense of security' of Africans.[48] These could not be recovered by conversion to Islam, said Mbiti, for that 'statistical giant' was 'an anachronism in the new Africa'.[49]

[130] Mbiti was certainly aware also of defects in 'mission Christianity in Africa'. One was that it was 'a faith which is active once a week, while the rest of the week is virtually empty'.[50] Another was 'the scandal of division in Protestant mission Churches'. And a third, the failure of 'mission Christianity [to] penetrate sufficiently deep into

41 Mbiti 1969: 15
42 Mbiti 1969: 4-5, 15-16
43 Mbiti 1969: 5
44 Mbiti 1969: 16-17, 22-23
45 Mbiti 1969: 5, 23, 27-28, 221
46 Mbiti 1969: 261, 264, 272
47 Mbiti 1969: 264
48 Mbiti 1969: 261
49 Mbiti 1969: 254
50 Mbiti 1969: 3

African religiosity', which estranged many Africans from it.[51] Even so, he was deeply convinced that Christianity was Africa's only real hope:

> The uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ. […] It is He, and only He, Who deserves to be the goal and standard for individuals and mankind. […Therefore,] I consider traditional religions, Islam and the other religious systems to be preparatory […] ground in the search for the Ultimate. [… O]nly Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing the way to that ultimate Identity, Foundation and Source of security.[52]

Other religionists

Mbiti's *praeparatio evangelica* position has been criticised by the Ghanaian anthropologist Kofi Asare Opoku as 'represent[ing] an unwillingness to look at [African traditional religion] as a religion in its own right'.[53] This would have been valid criticism from the point of view of the empirical study of religions, studying religions only as time- and place-bound events in the cultural history of humankind and, therefore, never discriminating between them on theological grounds. Opoku, however, did not ground his criticism of Mbiti in this secular approach, but in a different interpretation of the *homo religiosus* position, which he turned not only into a meta-, but also into a post-Christian inclusive theology of religions. Opoku regarded 'ATR' – Mbiti's 'African Traditional Religion', in the singular, unified and pan-africanised – as Africa's 'enduring heritage', it being 'God's salvific history in the history [of Africans]', and 'an affirmation of God's presence with African people, […] since God is the God of all humankind'.[54] As a religion, ATR was, therefore, he seems to suggest, the co-equal of Christianity and preferable for Africans, for it was 'undergirded by a fundamental indigenous African value system'.[55]

In the train of Parrinder,[56] Mbiti, E. Bolaji Idowu,[57] and other African Christian scholars have securely established the religionist paradigm in the **[131]** study of 'ATR' in Departments of Religious Studies in the (formally) secular universities of the Anglophone Africa. 'ATR' was methodologically unsound, for 'metaphysical neutrality' and testability were absent from its descriptions of the indigenous religions of Africa, past and present.[58] Yet, ATR was a great academic success, because it offered a new identity construct to post-colonial African university students, that of Africans having always been inherently religious. It was successful because it dovetailed with their mainly

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[51] Mbiti 1969: 253-254

[52] Mbiti 1969: 277

[53] Opoku 1993: 69

[54] Opoku 1993: 70, 78-80

[55] Opoku 1993: 78

[56] Parrinder's position was more nuanced than either Mbiti's or Idowu's. When he referred to Africans as 'incurably religious', he added: 'but this they share with all mankind' (Parrinder 1969: 235), thus expressing the position of Protestant liberal theology that all humans were religious by nature, because they had been created that way by God. Parrinder also drew attention occasionally to the diversity of the 'traditional religions' of Africa, and at times used the plural, 'traditional religions' (e.g. Parrinder 1969: 5, 7, 8, 9, 15, 228). And he also admitted that 'there are people who reject religion […] in […] African cities', and that 'the loosening of religious ties is evident in Africa' (Parrinder 1969: 231).

[57] Cf. especially Idowu 1973. Idowu's religionism is well expressed in his definition of religion as 'man's spontaneous awareness of, and reaction to […] a Living Power, […] unseen […], seeking to bring man into communion with Himself. […] In short, man is so constituted and conditioned that he must be dependent upon God' (Idowu 1973: 75; also 189-190).

[58] Cf. Westerlund 1985, 1993; Platvoet 1996: 111-115, 122-123

Christian, and partly traditional backgrounds, and with their pan-African hopes and horizons. In the post-colonial pan-African market of theologies and ideologies, that romantic, palliative 'invention of tradition' proved a great theological, and an even greater ideological success,[59] which may well be illustrated from the shift Departments of Religious Studies effected in the Anglophone universities of Africa after 1970. Their metropolitan *Alma Mater*, the secular(ist) University of London, had fostered a rationalist climate of unbelief among many staff and students of the University-Colleges it founded and supervised between 1945 and the 1960s, when it gradually lost control over them. The Departments of Religious Studies were successful, first in counterbalancing its atheism, and then in gradually eliminating it.[60]

MBITI'S INVENTION OF TRADITION

Mbiti's phrase, 'Africans are notoriously religious', is 'as notorious', say Shorter & Onyanchaa, 'as the religiosity [it] purport[s] to describe'. It was quoted that often, that it spun off a set of similar opinions, commonly held inside and outside Africa, which are variations on this theme. One is that **[132]** 'ancient religious traditions and rituals are still vigorously flourishing' in Africa. Another that 'a fanatical Islam [is] dominating huge swathes of the African continent'. A third that in Africa, 'Christians in their first fervour fill […] churches to overflowing'. And a fourth that in Africa 'new religious movements proliferate everywhere'.[61]

This paradigmatic image of Africa as 'inherently religious' has more recently acquired an equally paradigmatic – and mythic – mirror-image: that of Europe as 'the home of a relentless and inexorable secularisation', and as completely irreligious. These two myths gave birth to the vision of the 'reverse mission' among the African preachers, who came to Europe not only to found Pentecostal/charismatic churches among labour migrants from Africa,[62] but also 'to re-evangelise the West'.[63] Their use of the myth is curious, because it is based on the premise that 'traditional Africa' was religious. Their use of it is, therefore, inconsistent with the all-out war African Pentecostal churches have implacably been waging on the indigenous religions of Africa as creations of Satan ever since they began to operate in Africa.[64]

Actually, Shorter & Onyanchaa's research into the religious situation in Nairobi, a metropolis with some three million inhabitants, shows a very different religious situation from the one portrayed in the dichotomy set out above, as will be shown in greater detail below. Here and now, however, the discrepancy between the myth and African religious realities serves to alert us to the cultural functions of this mythic dichotomy of religious Africa *versus* secular Europe, and to a theory which explains them.

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[59] Cf. Platvoet 1996: 122-126
[60] Cf. Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 19-22
[61] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 11
[62] Ter Haar 1998a: 1; 1998b: 167
[63] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 11-13
[64] Cf. e.g. Meyer 1992a, 1992b

Invention of tradition

The theory is the 'invention of tradition'.[65] It states that 'inventions of tradition' are paradigmatic identity constructs of a particular group of people at a time of swift and unsettling change, by which they construct, and claim, continuity of identity with a suitable, but mainly mythical past.[66] Such 'traditions' are usually invented at a time when a society is forcefully made aware of its past identity by its becoming part – willy-nilly – of larger frameworks – **[133]** political, economical, cultural and other – and must adapt to much wider horizons. Inventions of traditions 'call in the old world to redress the balance of the new'.[67]

They are also counter-inventions, because they serve, implicitly or explicitly, to establish some measure of insularity within, and a cultural, non-political opposition to, those wider frameworks. A celebration of 'us' is explicit in all of them, and a dichotomy of 'us' *versus* 'them' is at least implicit in them, and at times their very heart.

A well-examined example from modern Western history, in which the 'us'-'they' opposition is muted, is British royal pageantry after 1877, when British monarchy had politically been reduced to a national symbol by being exalted to the 'Olympus of decorative, integrative impotence'.[68] Ever since, British royal rituals have been developed into an increasingly efficient instrument for managing British national sentiments by pretending that this monarchy had 'survived for more than a thousand years' and was 'an emblem of continuity in a rapidly dissolving world'.[69] Celebrating Britain as 'Land of Hope and Glory' because of its Empire, royal rituals also expressed, but in muted terms only, British insularity towards 'the Continent' (of Europe), where monarchies crumbled.[70] They also soothed internal unease about the unsettling class conflicts in modern British society. When Britain found itself on the rim of Europe without an empire and a satellite to its former colony, the USA, after World War II, royal ritual 'provided a comfortable palliative to the loss of world-power status'.[71]

The classic example of the first type is, however, the kilt of Scottish Highlanders, reputedly the distinctive national dress of Scotchmen since time immemorial, but actually developed after the Union with England in 1707. It served 'in a sense as a protest' against that inclusion, in particular after 1782, when the ban on Highland dress, outlawed in the Highlands after the rebellion of 1745, was lifted.[72] The fabrication of a fictive Highland epic culture, and the creation of a distinctive dress and music tradition, and its imposition on the whole Scottish nation, 'was the work of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries'.[73]

Another example, from Dutch history, is the political myth of the 'triple chain' (*drievoudigh snoer*), the alleged unbreakable bond between 'God, the [Calvinist] Dutch Nation, and the House of Orange'. It had tied them together reputedly since the insurrection against Spain in the mid-sixteenth century, from **[134]** which the Dutch nation

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65 Cf. Hobsbawn & Ranger 1993 (1983[1])
66 Cf. Hobsbawm 1993
67 Cannadine 1993: 124
68 Cannadine 1993: 116, 120-122, 133, 139
69 Cannadine 1993: 152
70 Cannadine 1993: 145-149
71 Cannadine 1993: 157
72 Trevor-Roper 1993: 18-27
73 Trevor-Roper 1993: 16sq.

was born. But the myth actually dated from the mid-nineteenth century only, when anti-papist riots broke out in protest against the decision of Dutch government to allow the formal re-establishment of Roman Catholic bishoprics in the Netherlands.[74]

In these examples, the inventions of tradition primarily refashioned the collective identities of a particular society or group by bolstering their pride in a fictive past. The 'others', and the dichotomous mirror-images entertained about them, were mainly mutely present in them only, e.g. in the case in British royal rituals and the Scottish kilt, although in some – e.g. the 'triple chain' –, the unspoken reference to the despicable other rang loud and clear.

Inventions of traditions may also be of the second kind. They work the other way round. They focus on 'the others', invent their inferiority, and thereby establish 'our' superiority. Edward Said uncovered this mechanism through his analysis of the 'Orientalist' tradition in Western scholarship on Islam. He defined it as a 'Western style of thought, based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between "the Orient" and […] "the Occident" [for] dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'. It acts, he added, within the existing power-relations between the West and the Muslim world by asserting the latter's inferiority for the purpose of maintaining the superiority of the West.[75]

Another example is David Chidester's analysis of the 'frontier Comparative Religion' of white settlers in South Africa about the African societies on the borders of their colonies between 1653 and 1900. Time and again, they invented Africans as savages without religion and civilisation, and their territories as empty wasteland, in the periods when they were at war with them and had an 'open frontier' with them. And they represented them as having religions after all, as soon as the frontier had been closed **after** the Africans had been subjected to white rule and had lost their titles to their land.[76]

A third example is Valentin Mudimbe's analysis of Europe's innumerable *Invention[s] of Africa* in the past five centuries as primitive, simple, childish, savage, brutal, barbaric, backward, retarded, without religion, full of superstition, black magic, witchcraft, witch hunts, witchdoctors and cannibalism, pagan, idolatrous, fetishist, animist, the dark continent, and even the heart of darkness. All this in contradistinction to Europe, which was deemed civilised, Christian, religious, developed, etc..[77] Western scholarship not only developed 'Orientalism' for dominating the East, said Mudimbe, it also developed an 'Africanist' discourse to suit Europe's self-indulgent view of **[135]** history from the point of view of an inherently superior white race, and its need to expand into the 'virgin areas' of the world.[78] Inventions of tradition are, therefore, strategies of 'power-knowledge'.[79]

Inventions of tradition are, however, not peculiar to modern Europe, but part and parcel of all political and cultural histories, e.g. also of those of African societies in the pre- and post-colonial periods.[80] The myth of Africa as incurably, or notoriously, religi-

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[74] Van Eijnatten 2001
[75] Cf. Said 1978; Van Rinsum 2001: 39-42, 92
[76] Chidester 1996: 11-26, *passim*
[77] Cf. Mudimbe 1988: 9-11, 19-22, *passim*
[78] Cf. Mudimbe 1988: 16-17
[79] Mudimbe 1988: 11
[80] Cf. e.g. Platvoet 1991 for an analysis of the Anokye myths as an invention of tradition in Asante, developed after the sack of Kumasi by the British on 4-5 February 1874.

ous is one of the inventions of tradition of modern Africa. It is understood best as a post-colonial counter-invention against the pre-colonial and colonial European inventions of Africa as primitive, savage, without religion, pagan, superstitious, full of witchcraft, witch hunts, sorcery and black magic, and so imagined to be full of fear.[81] It followed from these Western-Christian representations that Africa was desperately in need of Christianity, the religion of light and love, and of European civilisation, which would bring it rationality, progress and prosperity. Against these justifications of the Christian missionary enterprise in Africa and its colonisation by the nations of Europe, white and African liberal Christian theologians developed the 'ATR'-discourse in theological institutions and Departments of Religious Studies of Africa.[82] From the fact that religion was not neatly separated from the other domains of society in pre-colonial Africa – as it was increasingly in [secularising] Europe [after 1800] –, and so was indistinct and in a sense pervasive, they concluded that African societies, and Africans, were 'deeply religious'. I will show below that that conclusion **is** invalid. But their interpretation was also 'Christianising', or as p'Bitek said, 'Hellenising', the indigenous religions of Africa. We will now summarise his fierce **[136]** criticism of Western scholarship on African religions, including that of African Christian theologians such as Mbiti.

OKOT P'BITEK VERSUS JOHN MBITI

p'Bitek

The renowned Ugandan poet,[83] politician and anthropologist, Okot p'Bitek was born on 9 June, 1931, in Gulu in the north of Uganda. Both his parents were Christians, but retained some elements of their traditional way of life. His mother was a well-known dancer and composer of songs, and his father a famous story-teller and dancer from the Patiko chiefdom. p'Bitek left for England in 1956 to study at Bristol and Aberystwyth universities till 1960, in which period he lost his 'Christian commitment'.[84] From 1960 to 1963, he read Social Anthropology at St. Peter's College, Oxford University, under the supervision of E.E. Evans-Pritchard, G. Lienhardt and J. Beattie. He was in Uganda in 1962 for a few months of fieldwork for his BA-thesis.[85] While at Oxford, he became extremely dissatisfied with the 'religionist' theories of his tutors about the indigenous religions of Africa. They came in for biting criticism in his later publications about the religion of the Acholi.[86] He went back to East Africa in 1963, where he died in 1982.

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[81] Cf. Platvoet 1998a: 7. Cf. also Kudadjie (1973: 46; 1976: 74) who regarded the presentation of the African as a thorough-going *homo religiosus* an 'over-reaction to the […] rather annoying remarks by non-Africans'.

[82] Edwin Smith is the *fons et origo* of this tradition (cf. Van Rinsum 1999, 2001:25-88). Other important contributors were Placide Tempels, Geoffrey Parrinder, Andrew Walls, and Noel Q. King (cf. Westerlund 1985, 1993; Platvoet 1989a, 1996). The important part played by white theologians in its origin may seem remarkable in view of the present explicit opposition of Africa as religious to Europe as secular. However, sympathetic 'outsiders' have more often played a major role in the invention of an ameliorative identity construct for the 'insiders'. Cf. e.g. Trevor-Roper (1993: 21-22, 25-26) on the crucial role of two Englishmen in the invention of the kilt as the 'typical Highlander dress'.

[83] Okot p'Bitek is particularly well known for his literary work, including the famous *Song of Lawino* (p'Bitek 1969a; cf. also p'Bitek 1970).

[84] Heron 1984: 3

[85] p'Bitek 1964

[86] p'Bitek 1971b, no date/a. His criticism probably was the reason why the D.Phil thesis, which he submitted in the late 1960s (p'Bitek no date/b), was never approved.

Already in 1963, in his earliest the article on *The Concept of Jok among the Acholi and the Lango*, p'Bitek noted that the attitude to death of the traditional Acholi could not be squared with Western notions of religion:

> At this supreme crisis, the Acholi exhibit a clearly irreligious tendency. There is no blinking at death. It is faced squarely without turning to ultra-human forces for consolation. There is no heaven to which the departed retire to join some god in celestial splendour, nor a hell to await the sinful.[87]

[137] In the same article, he remarked scathingly about the interpretation of *Jok* as either High God, or Supreme Being, or as *mana* by early missionaries and ethnographers:

> All our students of Acholi and Lango religion occupied themselves with one task, to find the meaning of the term Jok. [....] Having assumed what Jok stood for, they endeavoured to order the available material to suit their assumptions. They became slaves of their definitions.[88]

He argued that the Western-Christian concept of a hierarchic structure with God at the top was not applicable to Acholi and Lango religions, for 'there was no high god [in them] to whom all knees were bended'.[89] In his interpretation, *jok* was a generic category for the total spiritual world, the specific meaning of which depended on the context in which it was used.[90] He concluded that claims that *jok* is the Supreme Being must be rejected because they 'do not seem to be based on any concrete evidence',[91] and in particular because the religion of the Central Luo was concerned with individual causes of misfortune and ill health, and not with any 'ultimate power' responsible for the sum total of human suffering and life.[92] His studies of Acholi funeral rites, and the lamentations sung at funerals, documented that they interpreted death in terms of a personal battle between an individual and death, but entertained 'no thought of another world',[93] and cultivated a clear awareness that once a person is dead, he will not return. On the basis of the ethnographic data he collected, p'Bitek presented the Luo and Acholi as a group of people 'with an atheistic outlook',[94] who felt no need for a reference to an 'ultimate power' or 'God', and clearly exhibited an irreligious tendency:

> When the game of ritually acting out their deeply felt needs and desires and hopes had produced no satisfactory results, at this level, the central Luo became sceptical and irreligious, and preferred to face the facts of life coolly and realistically. When your son died, you wept, but amid tears, you declared, '*Wi-lobo*'; 'This is the way of the world'![95]

'Hellenisation'

In 1971, p'Bitek became the first African scholar to produce a systematic critique of the 'Africans are incurably religious' discourse with the publication of his *African Religion*

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87 p'Bitek 1963: 20; also 1971a: 99-100
88 p'Bitek 1963: 16
89 p'Bitek 1963: 28
90 Cf. p'Bitek 1971a: 70-79; cf. also p'Bitek no date/a
91 p'Bitek 1971a: 79
92 p'Bitek 1971b: 85
93 p'Bitek 1971a: 99
94 p'Bitek 1971a: 100

in Western Scholarship. In this little book, he accused **[138]** a wide array of authors on the indigenous religions of Africa of 'Hellenizing' African gods. He used that term because they imposed on them metaphysical notions, such as 'eternity', 'omniscience', 'omnipotence', etc.,[96] developed in Greek philosophy and used in Christian theological discourses on the Christian God.[97] These authors suggested that 'Africans had hellenized their deities […] before coming into contact with Greek metaphysical thinking'. p'Bitek rejected that claim as 'absurd and misleading'.[98] By this hellenisation they had failed to represent African indigenous religions 'on the basis of African thought systems'.[99] As an anthropologist, p'Bitek attempted to do precisely that in his *Religion of the Central Luo* (also published in 1971) in order to prove that Luo religion was a this-worldly system, and to disprove its earlier 'Hellenist' representations.

The purpose of his A*frican Religion in Western Scholarship* was methodological. It was a forceful critique on how, for centuries, the West had kept Africa, and African religions in particular, confined within Christian conceptual frameworks. His biting criticism attacked any author, European and African, who had 'Hellenised' the indigenous religions of Africa by 'dress[ing] up African deities with Hellenic robes and parad[ing] them before the Western world'.[100] He included among these 'intellectual smugglers' not only his mentors at Oxford, but also African nationalists like Kenyatta, Senghor and Danquah, and missionaries like Edwin Smith, Placide Tempels and John Taylor, as well as African Christian theologians like Mbiti. The latter he even called the 'chief intellectual smuggler' for having introduced into the study of the indigenous religions of Africa enough Greek metaphysical material 'to hellenise three hundred African deities'.[101] By presenting a strong deity as omnipotent, a wise one as omniscient, an old one as eternal, and a great one as omnipresent, he had converted, said p'Bitek, this-worldly religions into other-worldly spiritualities.[102] Greek metaphysical terms, however, were 'meaningless in African thinking'.[103]

[139] *The paradox*

p'Bitek insisted that the indigenous religions of Africa must be represented 'on the basis of African thought-systems'. Paradoxically, he himself derived the conceptual framework for articulating his critique of the Hellenisation of the indigenous religions of Africa from the death of God debate in Western-Christian theology initiated by John Robinson in 1963 with his *Honest to God*.[104] In his *Reflect, Reject, Recreate; A Reply to B.A. Ogot, Ali Mazrui and Peter Rigby*, p'Bitek wrote:

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[95] p'Bitek 1971b: 160
[96] p'Bitek 1971a: 28, 41,46-47, 49-50, 74-76, 80, 85-88, 91, 99, 107, 112; 1969b
[97] 'When Christianity embraced Greek philosophy and the Christian faith became Hellenised, it developed into, perhaps, the most imposing theological system that man ever erected' (p'Bitek no date/a: 6).
[98] p'Bitek 1971: 80; also 85: 'the Nilotes, like the early Jews, do not think metaphysically'; and: 'the crux of the matter is that it never occurred to missionaries that Africans do not think metaphysically'.
[99] p'Bitek 1971a: 119
[100] p'Bitek 1971a: 41
[101] p'Bitek 1972: 29; cf. also Van Rinsum 2000
[102] Cf. p'Bitek 1971a: 88
[103] p'Bitek 1971a: 88
[104] Cf. Van Rinsum 2001: 105-112

> I admit I am neither a Christian nor a pagan. I do not believe in gods or spirits. I do not believe in witchcraft or supernatural forces. Heaven and hell do not make sense to me and for me metaphysical statements are nonsensical.[105]

In addition, his analysis of Lango and Acholi religion was a Western functionalist one. Religion enabled people to cope with suffering, and served to preserve the traditional social structure. Religion was clearly not a system *sui generis* for p'Bitek. It consisted of numerous different social activities and interactions with the spiritual world of *jok* in all the various contextual frameworks emerging in a society, thereby assuring its continued existence and achieving its multifarious goals. He summarised his view of it as follows:

> [The African's] religion, for which he has no term, is the full participation of all sectors of the community: Man, Nature, and Spirits, in the life process. [106]

His concept of religion was essentially an articulation, *avant la lettre*, of Robin Horton's 'intellectualist approach'.[107] Explanation, prediction and control are the essential and central functions of African indigenous religions in Horton's theory. They serve functions analogous to those of Western science. Horton viewed Mbiti, Idowu and other African and European Christian scholars of the indigenous religions of Africa as the 'devout opposition' to the neutral social scientific explanation of these religions. It is, he wrote,

> united by a methodological and theological framework, which has been strongly influenced, first and foremost, by their own Christian faith, but also by a long tradition of comparative studies of religion carried out by Christian theologians.[108]

[140] If the devout opposition's perspective was Western-Christian, p'Bitek's was a Western one too, that of evolution. In his view, the phase of religion would be followed by that of modern science and reason, that is by secularisation:

> But will the African deities survive the revolution in science and philosophy, which killed the Christian God? I doubt it. Christianity has declined because the Christian God used to fill gaps in science, or to deal with life at the point at which things got beyond human explanation or control. This has now been dismissed as intellectual laziness or superstition. The Christian God has become intellectually superfluous and, moreover, the metaphysical statements about him do not make sense to modern man.[109]

Okot p'Bitek was aware that his openly acknowledged atheism caused him to hold deviant views on religion as it functioned in African societies. At the same time, he was fascinated by the phenomenon of religion and castigated the Western-Christian metaphysical interpretation of the indigenous religions of Africa. The paradox is that his criticism of Western-Christian scholarship of these religions was inspired itself by a Western-Christian theological discourse, the one that pronounced the death of the metaphysical God.

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[105] p'Bitek 1972: 31
[106] p'Bitek 1986: 22
[107] On Horton's intellectualist approach, cf. Morris 1987: 304-309
[108] Horton 1993: 161; 1984: 391
[109] p'Bitek 1971a: 112

THE EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY

Okot p'Bitek opposed the myth that 'Africa is incurably religious' along two lines. One was his analysis of religious indifference and irreligion in Luo traditional society. The other was that he regarded his own intellectual development as but one instance of the secularising impact which Western formal education was going to have on African religious allegiances. The evidence contradicting the myth of Africa's 'incurable religiousness' is discussed below along these two lines. The first part deals with religious indifference in 'traditional' African societies as they mostly were in the late pre-colonial and early colonial era. In later colonial and post-colonial times, the number of African 'traditional' societies diminished rapidly in keeping with the degree to which they were transformed by colonisation, Western formal education, the new economic opportunities, mobility and labour migration, the propagation of Christianity, Islam and other religions, and numerous other factors. The second part deals with secularisation in present-day Africa.

Religious indifference in traditional Africa

It is a misconception that traditional Africa was deeply religious. As we indicated above, this position is a faulty inference from the embryonic institutional differentiation of the pre-colonial societies in Africa. It caused religion to be intertwined with most other 'social institutions', themselves mostly also embryonic, and to be merely an aspect of them. Religion could, therefore, not **[141]** be clearly identified as a distinct institute, as in modern Western societies.[110] As African languages also did not have a term for 'religion', it was clear, in addition, that African minds had coined no distinct concept for it. From such facts, it is correctly concluded, as did Mbiti,[111] that religion permeated other 'departments of life' and could not always be easily separated from them. He also correctly inferred from it, that 'no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life' was found in African traditional societies.[112] Mbiti may even have perceived that these typically modern Western cosmological dichotomies are misleading in the research of the indigenous religions of Africa. In them, matter and spirit, the natural and the supernatural, the seen and the unseen are always viewed as interpenetrating in numerous ways, degrees and variations,[113] as they are believed to do in most other religions.

However, from the absence of institutional differentiation and conceptual dichotomies in traditional cosmological and religious thought in African pre-colonial societies, one cannot conclude, as did Mbiti, that Africans were 'deeply religious', lived in 'a religious universe', and possessed 'a religious ontology'.[114] He expressed that view in several other ways, such as: 'wherever the African is, is his religion'; and 'each [African] is

[110] Cf. Goody 1961: 155-156
[111] Cf. Mbiti 1969: 1. In line with his religionism, Mbiti's phrase is more ameliorative: 'Religion permeates into *all* the departments of life *so fully* that it is not always easy or possible to isolate it'.
[112] Mbiti 1969: 2
[113] Cf. Platvoet 2004
[114] Mbiti 1969: 1, 15, 262; 1975: 27, 198

himself a living creed of his own religion'.[115] Nor is it correct to suggest on these grounds, as did Mbiti also, that 'religion [was] the strongest element in traditional background, and exert[ed] probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living' of the indigenous societies of pre-colonial Africa.[116]

One may discern a few reasons why Mbiti took this idealising and romanticising position. One was his Panafricanism. It inspired him to unify the indigenous religions of Africa into ATR. Another was his Christian religionism. It incited him to take a maximising view of it, for reasons linked with both Christianity's age-old inner constitution, its modern predicament in Europe, and his own need for indigenising Christianity in modern Africa.

All through its history, Christianity has been moulded increasingly into a cognitively consistent system of beliefs, articulated in explicit confessions of faith, to which believers were required to assent unreservedly. In addition, it demanded from them in principle an extreme and 'unworldly' degree of commitment, feasible only for a select few lifelong *devoti*, even in the pre-modern, religiously monochrome periods, when the Christian religion moulded European societies fairly deeply. Christian society – that is the 'mass' of 'ordinary Christians' – enabled the *devoti* to pursue their calling **142]** vicariously on their behalf. But their 'popular religion' was continually condemned by the *devoti* and theologians, and harassed from the pulpit by the preachers, as pagan, superstitious, magical, and syncretistic. The idealised Christian religion, preached from the pulpits and practised in convents, could not be pervasive of earlier Western societies because of Christianity's inner constraints as an 'unworldly', spiritualising religion in the ordinary worlds of pragmatic preoccupations of lay Christians.

Modern secularisation has recently severely aggravated Christianity's condition in this respect. Modern Western societies seem to have definitively destroyed Christianity's prospects of ever becoming their pervasive religion. They did so by first reducing it to merely one of their institutions, then by separating it constitutionally from their other institutions, and now by sucking its shrivelling, privatised spaces – the convent, the church, the Sunday, etc. – empty.[117]

The past cognitive and institutional idealisations of the Christian religion, and its ongoing reduction by modern secularisation, made Christian theologians and preachers lament often that religion no longer permeated society and the lives of its members. It inclined them to idealise and romanticise pervasive religion. It made them project, onto other societies and religions, the evidently impossible, yet obligatory ideal of religion pervading societies in the maximal sense of its members being 'thoroughly and inherently religious', as the *homo religiosus* theology implies **and prescribes**.

Mbiti and other African liberal theologians projected this romantic maximalisation of 'pervasive religion' onto African indigenous societies for two additional reasons. One was to develop a pan-African identity construct for modern African Christian intellectuals and having it serve as a counter-invention against the numerous past denigrations of **Africa** and 'African religion' by Europe, Africa's former colonial master. And the other was to put it at the service of indigenising Christianity in modern Africa by providing it with a referent to a mythic African religious past – a ploy to which many

[115] Mbiti 1969: 2, 3
[116] Mbiti 1969: 1
[117] For an analysis of the latter development in the Netherlands after 1960, cf. Platvoet 2002: 122-127

religious reformers have resorted **in the past** in situations of deep and rapid transformation.

However, the absence of institutional differentiation of religion in the pre-colonial societies of Africa, and its consequent 'dissipation' over their other – mostly equally embryonic – 'institutions', does not allow one to jump to conclusions about the degree to which, and manner in which, religion pervaded them. Only by means of historical studies of single 'traditional' African societies can one establish whether 'religion' did pervade them deeply, or superficially, or not at all, or in variable ways, or in some other manner.[118] Any **[143]** view, maximal or minimal, must be founded on verifiable historical data,[119] if academic status is claimed for it, as Mbiti did.[120] We argue, on the basis of, admittedly limited, historical studies of two African indigenous religions,[121] and for reasons of methodology and wider comparative studies,[122] that a **[144]** minimal rather than a maximal interpretation of religion in African indigenous societies is due.

On the basis of these studies, three general conclusions may be drawn about the role of religion in the indigenous – mainly pre-colonial – societies of Africa. One respects a pattern that was visible in the religious activities of members of Akan societies in pre-colonial time.[123] Religious practice usually consisted in brief bursts of high-intensity religious communication, when some calamity – death, illness, or some other misfortune – had struck; and periods of religious laxity between them, at which ritual activity was kept at its lowest possible level as long as calamities did not strike. 'Proper' religious activity being quite expensive in Akan societies, a balance was apparently sought in the periods of religious laxity between keeping its costs as low as possible, and not offending, by undue neglect, the unseen beings who were **believed to be** entitled to a ritual at some particular moment.

Another conclusion respects the significant variations in the degree to which, and the time at which, religion 'permeated' the other domains of Akan and Ju/'hoan social life – kinship, politics, warfare, law and order, technology, economy, trade, recreation, etc. Their permeation by 'religion' varied considerably, per society, per 'institute', and per event. Mbiti assumed that religion evidently pervaded all the institutions of African indigenous societies deeply at all times. In contradiction to it, it may be pointed out that in pre-colonial and early colonial Akan society, religion was completely absent from at least one important recreational activity, the telling of the stories about the trickster Ananse ('Spider').[124] In addition, it was often absent from the other domains of Akan life

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[118] For a philosophical refutation of Mbiti's position, cf. Kudadjie 1973

[119] Cf. also Metogo (1997: 71, 79): 'Simplement, les généralisations hâtives doivent faire place à l'observation des faits'.

[120] Cf. Mbit1 1969: 1 ('academic scrutiny'), 6 ('African traditional religions […] studied properly and respectfully as an academic discipline in their own right'), 6-14

[121] They respect the religion of the Akan societies in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (cf. Platvoet 1973; 1979; 1982a: 39-44, 56-68, 84-120, 175-215; 1982b; 1983a; 1984; 1985a; 1985b; 1991; 1999c; 2000a; forthcoming) and that of the Ju/'hoan San – or Bushmen – in Nambia and Botswana in mid-20th century (Platvoet 1995, 1999b, 1999c, 2000b)

[122] Cf. Platvoet 1989a, 1989b, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, forthcoming.

[123] In the tiny Ju/'hoan foraging bands, the pattern of their only ritual activity, the trance – or curing – dances, was quite different, being determined rather by ecological and social considerations than by a 'religious' one. In addition, their 'religion' was quite exceptional in explicitly cultivating an attitude of explicit hostility towards, and warfare with, their unseen beings; and consequently in being cheap, for they did not need to bring them costly sacrifices. Cf. Platvoet 1995, 1999b, 1999c, 2000b

[124] For them, cf. Rattray 1930; cf. also Metogo 1997: 9-10, 39-42, 74-76

for long periods. And thirdly, if present, it was more often a minor side affair than central and crucial. Moreover, it was hardly ever present in ritual activities as a totality, perceived in the systematic and hierarchical order in which Western ethnographies usually present it,[125] but **[145]** only by the isolated part, or parts, which was, or were, relevant there and then for the business at hand.

All in all, the role of Akan religion in Akan precolonial society seems subdued, casual, pragmatic and 'secular' rather than central, fervent, deep and thorough. In his introduction to four articles on African indigenous religions in *Journal of Religion in Africa* (15, 3, 1985), Adrian Hastings summarised my views on the 'pragmatic secularity' of Akan religion in pre-colonial time[126] very well as follows:

> Religion was certainly not banished from these areas [social structure, received proverbial knowledge, morality, politics], but it may be over-easy to lay emphasis upon the uniformly religious character of all traditional African society. The impression these studies provide is far more of a pragmatic secularity in which an underlying religious connotation may seldom be wholly absent but is often far more muted than students of religion have suggested. The secularism of African tradition is a dimension still inadequately explored, but it would be unwise to ignore it.[127]

The sources of Mbiti's exaggerated representation of the intense religiosity of the indigenous societies of Africa are, therefore, not only his religionism and pan-africanism, but also his training as a Western intellectual. It made him represent 'ATR' – African Traditional Religion – after the idealising and systematising model of Western-Christian religion and canonise those idealisations. He was also misled by the systematic presentations of the indigenous religions by professional ethnographers. By collecting very many dispersed data from very many different sources – informants, villages, occasions –, and presenting them as systems of belief, they habitually presented them as much fuller, and more complete, unambiguous, sure and believing than they actually were in the heads and hearts of most of their believers. And they often also represented them as much more pious, ideal and beautiful than they actually were in the social, political, economical, therapeutic and other practices to which a traditional religion was habitually put.[128]

More importantly, however, the ATR-mode of the study of the indigenous religions of Africa failed to present them as a distinctive type of religions in their own right with traits peculiar to them marking them off as quite different from Christianity and the other religions of the (first) 'axial age'.[129] Mbiti, actually, was to some degree an exception to this rule, for he did recognise some of their peculiar traits.[130] But his religionism, and his need to see **[146]** them as *praeparatio evangelica* for the sake of indigenising mission Christianity in Africa, prevented him from regarding them neutrally as religions equal **to** any other, including Christianity. So, instead of merely noting that they were

[125] Rattray being a happy exception; cf. Platvoet 1982a: 57-68
[126] Cf. Platvoet 1985b
[127] Hastings 1985: 173; cf. also Metogo 1997: 9-11
[128] Cf. also Metogo 1997: 11-12
[129] Cf. Platvoet 1989, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1998a, 1998b
[130] Cf. Mbiti 1969: 2-5

anthropocentric rather than theocentric;[131] and accepting that they focussed on the past and present rather than on the future, and were pragmatic and materialist rather than spiritual and devotional religions, he rebuked and condemned them for these qualities.[132]

Thereby he normatively imposed upon them the dichotomous categories of one particular religion, modern Western Christianity.[133] But he recognised their pervasiveness, and that 'formal distinction[s] between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life' were absent from them.[134] A neutral study of these marks would have alerted him to their distinct morphology and separate status in the general history of the religions of humankind. Moreover, African theological scholars of the indigenous religions in Departments of Religious Studies either ignored the contextual study of these religions or opposed it for theological reasons. So they failed to notice and study their manifold, usually quite pragmatic, and at times quite ugly, non-religious functions in pre-colonial societies, or presented them in ameliorative ways.

These mechanisms caused many traits of the indigenous religions of Africa, as they actually were, to remain in the dark. One **of these traits** was the complete absence of articulation of beliefs. Another the huge internal variation in belief content and adhesion to them. And a third, the doubts, scepticism, religious indifference and outright unbelief entertained by very many of their believers.[135]

Other properties of African indigenous religions were intimately connected with, and conditioned by, the traits pre-colonial African societies had in common. In terms of demography, they were tiny to relatively small societies. Their dominant mode of thought was not Lévy-Bruhl's prelogical one, but what Gellner has termed, 'multi-stranded' thought, a type of pre-reflective thinking which is also common and normal in 'ordinary' social life in **[147]** Western societies.[136] Their technologies were well-adapted to their ecology and their economical, cultural and social needs, but significantly smaller in number and efficiency than modern Western technologies. Their prosperity – though not necessarily their wellbeing – was therefore significantly lower. Their members lived in mainly primary, face-to-face relationships with kinship most often as their major institute of social organisation. And lastly, they lived in micro-, rather than macro-, worlds in terms of geography and external inputs, as well as history and remembered depth of the past. But those micro-worlds were also much more complex in terms

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[131] Cf Metogo (1997: 10): 'Enfin, le charactère anthropocentrique si souvent relevé des religions africaines a rarement fait l'objet d'études non suspectes d'apologétique chrétienne ou musulmane'. On the anthropocentrism of African traditional religions, cf. also Metogo 1997: 47-65.

[132] Cf. Mbiti 1969: 15-28

[133] They are those of nature *versus* the supernatural, man *versus* God, matter *versus* spirit, the seen *versus* the unseen, the profane *versus* the sacred, the material *versus* the spiritual, the secular *versus* the religious, etc.

[134] Mbiti 1969: 2. Cf. also Metogo (1997: 80) on Augé's 'pagan logic', by which African indigenous religions differ(ed) profoundly from Christianity, for they reject(ed) all dualism and moral principles outside the vicissitudes of individual and social life.

[135] Cf. also Metogo (1997: 9-11, 39-45, 54-57, 67-79, 80, 83) on 'primitive atheism' and 'freedom from God' in the stories, epics and initiation rituals of some African traditional societies. And Kudadjie (1973: 46n29) wrote: 'There are many Africans who do not belong to any religion or cult and who do not owe allegiance to any deity. […] In the experience of the writer (though admittedly limited) many of those regarded as 'traditional worshippers' truly have no religion'.

[136] Cf. Gellner 1988: 45sq.

of mandatory social interaction because of their unilineal kinship organisation and religion. The latter made it obligatory to have regular interaction with numerous categories of unseen beings, and the former with a much larger number of kin and affines than in modern Western societies, and to have primary, non-exhaustive, rather than contractual and exhaustive relationships with the other members of their societies.[137]

The morphology of these pre-colonial African societies was reflected in the general traits which many, perhaps most, of their religions had in common. They were community religions, co-extensive with their own societies, with a very low visibility. They were complex religions, consisting of loose conglomerates of inarticulate and variable beliefs about many different categories of unseen beings, properties and qualities. These beliefs were mostly present in the heads and hearts of their members in a dormant, 'subliminal' manner until some occasion demanded that a particular part of them be activated.[138] In addition, beliefs were usually vague and varied, hedged around with much uncertainty and ambiguity, the cause of much discussion as to the cause of an (unfortunate) event, what action was appropriate, and its manner and content. Moreover, they were religions of reciprocity of a highly pragmatic, instrumental kind, directed most often at cost-effective returns in this life, because in these societies, social relations – human and religious – demanded quite costly investments, and so a calculating mind, also in religious relationships.[139] These **[148]** anthropocentric, inarticulate religions were also highly adaptive and adoptive, at once mono-, poly-, and pan-theistic, but without an intrinsic and explicit relation to ethics, and without a trace of doctrine, mysticism,[140] spirituality, 'salvation' in an afterlife,[141] apocalypse, heaven and hell,[142] and, says Augé, with an internal drift towards atheism 'as their final truth'.[143] They were also dynamic religions, with a high turnover of gods, amulets and 'medicines' which had proved 'ineffective', and were constantly importing and inventing new ones that might provide better service at lower costs.[144] They were, therefore, very cost-conscious, rationalising and modernising religions, of the calculating, capitalist, materialist, contractual,[145] rather than the devotional, submissive, guilt-ridden kind, and mostly belittled in Western analyses as *do-ut-des* religions, or as 'magic' and 'superstition'.

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[137] Cf. e.g. Platvoet 1992: 18-22

[138] Cf. Platvoet 1999a: 488-492

[139] The classical study of an instrumental religion is Evans-Pritchard 1937 on *Magic, Witchcraft and Oracles among the Azande* – although Evans-Pritchard did not view their beliefs and practices as 'religion', restricting 'religion' in Western-Christian fashion to the theocentric dependency he found among the Nuer (cf. Lerner 1995, 2000: 118-119, 122). He described the Azande, therefore, as largely irreligious. Metogo (1997: 10-11, 13-14, 61-65, 101) too regards 'the widespread magical mentality' of modern Africa as an avenue to 'practical and technical atheism rather than to religious submission'. Robin Horton (1993) has, however, emphasised the central place of instrumental concerns in the indigenous religions of Africa. This pragmatism, however, was not even alien, *pace* Evans-Pritchard, to Nuer religion (Lerner 2000: 123).

[140] In the commonly accepted meaning of 'the spiritual quest for the most direct experience of God' (Pailin 1984: 224). For a discussion of the very different 'African mysticism' by divinities taking possession of humans, cf. Metogo 1997: 58-61.

[141] Cf. also Metogo 1997: 80

[142] Nor about the where-abouts of the ancestors, for they 'existed only through and for the living' (Metogo 1997: 51).

[143] Quoted in Metogo 1997: 80; cf. also Metogo (1997: 80-81n.33) for a survey of the discussion of Augé's thesis.

[144] Cf. also Metogo 1997: 80-93

[145] Cf. e.g. Metogo 1997: 67-68

In the colonial and post-colonial periods, the indigenous religions of Africa were completely swept off their feet by the immense micro-macro shift in mental horizons introduced by colonisation and globalisation.[146] In the dazzling religious pluralism of that era, they were completely surpassed by the immigrant religions in the external matters of institutional organisation, numbers of adherents, status and political influence. They took sweet revenge, however.[147] The traits marking religious practice in pre-colonial societies continue to deeply determine the pragmatic plural religious allegiance of many Christians and Muslims in modern Africa.[148] As do the scepticism[149] and religious indifference of the past.

[149] *Secularisation in modern Africa*

Christianity became a dominant religion in modern Africa, not for religious reasons but because it served the pragmatic interests of Africans. They 'converted' *en masse* after 1920, because its schools, hospitals and other contributions to modernisation enabled Africans to earn a living in the new economical order of the colonial and post-colonial societies.[150] As the religion of mass literacy and Western formal education in schools, Christianity grew spectacularly by the annual automatic intake of the pupils in its schools. By doing so, it became also, like Mbiti's Islam, a 'statistical giant'.[151] At the same time, as a 'classroom religion',[152] it planted 'seeds of destruction' in itself, as it had been doing for some time in Europe.[153] They were of two kinds, an indigenous one, and an imported one, each promoting religious indifference and secularisation in its own way.

The indigenous one was the traditional ecumenical religious pragmatism of very many Christians,[154] coupled with a calculating disinterest in religion as long as calamities do not strike, and with much scepticism and doubt as to how helpful religion really is when misfortune befalls. As long as there is no urgent need for rituals, religion is habitually observed at its lowest possible level by many.[155] And when there is need for re-

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[146] Cf. Horton 1971, 1975

[147] Cf. also Metogo (1997: 81-83) on the 'revenge of paganism' on missionary Christianity.

[148] Cf. Platvoet 1998a: 7-10; Metogo 1997: 91-102. Cf. also Platvoet 1979 for the Akan plural religious allegiance.

[149] Cf. Metogo (1997: 108-109, 112-113) on religious scepticism among young Muslim and Christian secondary school students and others interviewed by Raymond Deniel in Bamako, Mali, in 1976, and in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in 1977; and by Pierre Tiesserenc in Tchad in 1969 and 1972. Cf. also Pobee & Mends (1977: 5, 9-10) on secularism as 'characteristic of a fair section of the university men and the "been-tos" who studied in Europe and America', and 7% of the Ghanaians indicating in the 1966 census that they had no religion.

[150] Cf. Platvoet 1998a: 6, 11; Metogo 1997: 81, 106, 132-133

[151] Christianity became a global religion only at the time, and by means, of European 19t^{h} and early 20th century colonisation of much of the rest of the globe. But it did so primarily by its success in the formerly preliterate societies, in which it was itself a major instrument of the economic, cultural, social and political transformations of those societies, as was the case in sub-Saharan Africa. In regions where other major religions, scriptural traditions and fairly well developed economies were securely established, e,g. in most of Asia, it won very few converts, despite their subjection to European colonial dominion (cf. Platvoet 1998: 4-5).

[152] Taylor 1965: 15, 20, 22

[153] Cf. Platvoet 1998a: 10-16

[154] Cf. also Metogo (1997: 92) on a secondary school student in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in 1971, who said that he was a Roman Catholic at school in town, and a traditional believer at home in his village.

[155] Cf. Metogo (1997: 100-101, 102-105, 114, 118, 122, 132-133, 135, 136, 138) on modern mainline church Christians, who regarded the spiritualising focus on life-after-death of their churches irrelevant

ligion, it must bring health and wealth, and protection against evil forces that threaten them. So, Pentecostal and charismatic churches, practising faith healing and exorcism, hold great attraction, as does any prosperity gospel, but also any other possibly effective avenue, whether they be traditional priests, Muslim *malams*, or New Age, or Asian, cults.[156]

[150] The imported kind is Western formal education, at least if it **was** successful – which it most often is not in modern Africa – in providing access to jobs, health, wealth, social success, and integration into the globalising world with its abundance of information and opportunities for mobility, spatial and social. Together, education, prosperity and information could produce affluent, well-schooled, well-informed, emancipated people, trained in critical thought, who have much sympathy for religion, but no emotional or intellectual need for it, once they shed it, as they often easily do.[157]

Of course, the influence of this group of factors is quite limited as yet in modern Africa,[158] where states are corrupt and cleptocratic, and schools paths to the frustrations of unemployment or under-employment rather than to jobs, prosperity, security and a well informed, critical mind. On the contrary, in present-day Africa, education often serves to promote religion greatly by directing frustrated Africans to well-publicised forms of religion that promise deliverance or seek political change. One is the radical orthodoxies that do not eschew violence and may serve as effective instruments of political pressure for have-nots. Another is the ecstatic or other revivalist groups, in particular those that provide ways and means to survive in a desperate situation or to improve one's position in society.[159] So, in ailing Africa, education often adds 'proof' to Mbiti's myth of Africans being notoriously religious.[160]

But even in this Africa, the combined effect of these two secularising causes is undeniable. For, despite the full churches and the enthusiastic drumming and dancing, the number of people in Africa who are religiously indifferent, or inactive, nominal and critical[161] believers[162] seems to exceed by far those that are religiously committed, and those that practise their religion regularly. Moreover, the full churches themselves thrive on the perennial quest for health, wealth, education, status, and prosperity, and so foster, unwittingly, the modern economic rationalism that is at the heart of secularisation.[163]

So far, research into religious indifference and secularisation is virtually a virgin field. Moreover, its pioneers, Shorter & Onyanchaa and Metogo, **[151]** study them for

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for the pressing needs of their daily lives. They saved souls, but did not catch witches. It was also a ruse for robbing them of their territories.

[156] Cf. Platvoet 1998a: 7-10; Metogo 1997: 82; on the attraction of Asian cults in modern Ghana, cf. Dovlo 2002; Asamoah-Gyadu 2002

[157] Cf. Metogo (1997: 116-117, 119) for favourable opinions of Christians and Muslims on atheism as 'the road of freedom' to think for oneself in objectivity and impartiality. For confessions of explicit agnosticism or atheism, cf. Metogo 1997: 121-122, 137, 138-148. Cf. also above, note 148.

[158] But it is growing, says Metogo (1997: 148): 'Agnosticism and atheism spread more and more in Black Africa through critical African literature, [and] the teaching of the social and the natural sciences and philosophy'. Cf. also above, note 148.

[159] Cf. also Metogo 1997: 82.

[160] Cf. Platvoet 1998a: 10-13.

[161] Cf. especially the numerous instances reviewed by Metogo (1997: 100sq.).

[162] Cf. Kudadjie (1976: 74n29): 'There are many Africans who do not belong to any religion or cult and who owe no allegiance to any deity. [...] In the experience of the writer (though admittedly limited) many of those regarded as "traditional worshippers" truly have no religion'.

[163] Cf. Platvoet 1998a: 13-14; cf. also Metogo 1997: 100-106, 109-111

normative reasons, how they may be counteracted, and therefore from an alarmist rather than neutral perspective. Still, they provide us with many useful data.

That is in particular true of Shorter & Onyanchaa's research into religious participation[164] in Nairobi and the adjacent rural Kiambu in 1996. 'Modern Nairobi City', they write, 'has a population between two and three million inhabitants',[165] of which some 80% claims to be Christian. However, 'weekly church attendance is only 12% of the city's population; less frequent attendance is 20%, and active church involvement is only 4%'. Shorter & Onyanchaa conclude that 'in absolute numbers, the unchurched are growing to more than half of the total population – around 1.5 million'.[166] Which means that nearly two-thirds of the 'Christians' of Nairobi have drifted out of the Christian churches, lost all connections with the Christian religion into which they were baptised, and have become de-churched, or, in Metogo's terminology,[167] indifferent to religion.

Religious indifference is especially massive in Nairobi, if not universal, among the young males who came to it from their native rural areas in search for a job. Being jobless and desperately looking for one, they cannot afford the luxury of being religious, especially when donations are constantly being asked. Nor do they feel at home in the congregations of the affluent of Nairobi.[168] People with poorly paid jobs most often need income from a second job or other sources of additional income. They either cannot afford to attend **[152]** churches, or have become indifferent to religion and spend their weekends in bed, bars, beer-halls, disco's, discos, cinemas, etc.[169] Church attendance is highest among the affluent, but often for other than religious reasons:

> Church-going offers affluent Christians scope for achieving their own particular social, as well as their religious, goals. It reinforces their social networks. It offers them further opportunities for exercising leadership, deploying managerial and other professional skills, even perhaps finding clients. Furthermore, it confirms them in their chosen lifestyles. Above all, it provides a conscious or unconscious justification, at the highest possible level, for continuing to enjoy and acquire wealth.[170]

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[164] Metogo (1997: 87-148) devotes a chapter to an analysis of the causes and kinds of religious indifference among African believers – traditional, Muslim and Christian (87-119); and another to agnosticism and atheism (121-148). In the first, he surveys the data provided by the sociological publications of Deniel, Tiesserenc and Erny in the 1970s on attitudes towards, and participation in, religions in Africa. The three publications of Deniel respect four surveys by questionnaires and interviews which he conducted in the cities of Ouagadougou, Abidjan, and Bamako, and among the rural Ano of Ivory Coast, between 1968 and 1976. That of Tiesserenc discusses the three surveys he conducted in secondary schools in Tchad between 1969 and 1972. And Erny presents an analysis of four hundred autobiographies of students of the Faculty of Education of Kisangani University written in 1972-1973. In his chapter on agnosticism and atheism, these sources are used also, but are supplemented with an analysis of novels, mostly by Francophone African writers, published between 1953 and 1983. Some of these 'mystified' traditional beliefs but presented them at the same time as something of the past (124-126). Others 'demystified' them as human inventions (127-130), or at the expense of the new religions, Christianity (130-131) or Islam. Christianity's collusion with colonialism is the subject of a third group of novels (131-136). And two authors, Mongo Beti and James Ngugi, presented incisive sociological criticism of all African religions, and in particular of Christianity and took themselves an agnostic or Marxist view of religion (136-139).

[165] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 33

[166] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 36

[167] He distinguishes three kinds of 'religious indifference': religious relativism; religion separated from life; and the contest of religion (Metogo 1997: 92, 117-119; cf. also: 8, 11, 23, 39-41, 116-119).

[168] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 28-34, 39-40, 57-64

[169] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 64-66

[170] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 46

In affluent congregations in particular, religious participation serves to foster 'ecclesiastical pragmatism' and 'economic rationalism',[171] and is a major source of 'secularism among affluent Christians'.[172] Moreover, many affluent Christians 'prefer to spend Sunday at home, and some even find religious practice superfluous'.[173]

Shorter & Onyanchaa distinguish four kinds of irreligion in Nairobi and the surrounding Kiambu area. The first is philosophically argued explicit atheism. It was common among university staff and students in the first decades after independence.[174] But this 'academic unbelief' has suffered 'a certain erosion' in the past two decades due to a much 'stronger religious presence at universities and institutions of higher learning', in particular through the Departments of Religious Studies.[175] The second is the massive religious indifference of the urban poor. The third is the numerically much smaller secularism of the affluent, both among those who regularly attend church as well as among those who do not. And the fourth is the irreligion of the 'nominal' Christians of the Kiambu rural area, which Shorter & Onyanchaa link to the religious pragmatism endemic in their pre-colonial Kikuyu religion.[176] Only in the first of these four varieties was irreligion articulated. In the three, which are now widely prevailing, it is never explicitly argued. Their most **[153]** important sources, they say, are the 'consumer materialism' of both the rich and the poor;[177] urbanisation;[178] and the pragmatism of traditional religion.[179]

IN CONCLUSION

Both Mbiti and p'Bitek were inspired, and constrained, in their interpretation of the indigenous religions of Africa, by particular developments in Western intellectual history. This article is, therefore, rather a critical, reflexive exercise in the methodology of the Western study of the religions of Africa, whether by European or African scholars, than a substantive proof, or disproof, of either the views of Mbiti or p'Bitek. Such generalisations seem always to contain more ideology than fact, being extrapolated from very limited historical and/or regional data in highly selective and biased ways, and declared valid for the whole of 'Africa'.

Particular historical data on the single indigenous religions, if put into their own extra-religious contexts, point to a much more varied and variable picture: that of the dy-

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[171] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 56

[172] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 43-56. Cf. Shorter & Onyanchaa (1997: 14) for their definition of 'secularism'.

[173] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 46

[174] As it was in e.g. Mali, where only Marxist-Leninist philosophy was taught in public secondary schools and university colleges between 1964 to 1981 (Metogo 1997: 122, n.1). For explicit confessions of an atheist outlook on life, or inclinations towards one, cf. Metogo 1997: 122-124, 137, 138, 141, 142-148. Cf. also Pobee & Mends 1977: 5, 10-11

[175] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 19-22. Cf. also Metogo (1997: 7-9, 14, 122-124, 139-143, 150-158) on the influence of Marxist critique of religion in Francophone universities in Africa, and on the numerous Marxist-Leninist political parties – twenty-two in 1983 –, governments – seven in 1985 –, and intellectuals in Africa.

[176] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 126-128

[177] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 22-25, 43-56, 64-67, 71-83, 86-115

[178] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 28-42, 57-64

[179] Shorter & Onyanchaa 1997: 17-18, 26-27, 121-128

namic interplay of numerous modalities of religion and religions with unbelief, scepticism, doubt and irreligion at personal, local, regional, national and continental levels. It also seems academically invalid to oppose incurably religious Africa to Europe in the death throes, or the liberating light, of secularisation. Instead, it seems prudent to hold that, however much the trajectories of the religions of Europe and Africa actually differ, Africa was, is, and will basically be no more and no less a religious, and religiously indifferent, continent than Europe.

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Postscript, 28 July 2013

This article provoked a vigorous response at the explicit request of the Editor of *Exchange*, who introduced this article as follows in his editorial: 'Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum, senior researchers with experience of fieldwork in Africa,[180] have written a *massive attack* on the 'myth of enduring African religiosity'. Their well-documented and broad views will certainly pose questions and criticisms. We are willing to include replies of theologians in forthcoming issues and especially invite our African colleagues to answer' (*Exchange* 32, 2: 97; my italics). This invitation produced in the very same year a polemical reply by Kehinde Olabimtan (Olabimtan 2003). The Editor of *Exchange* introduced this response as follows: 'The quite provocative article by Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum: "Is Africa Incurably Religious" (Exchange 2003: 123-153, the second issue of this year) is answered by Kehinde Olabimtan from Ghana. Is this simply a clash of methodological choices? We are looking forward to more reactions on this theme'. Having had intimations that more African theologians were considering to write a reply, the editor requested that we delay our response to Olabimtan till further notice. Which we did. However, when no further 'counterattacks' were send in, we wrote a far too long delayed reply to Olabimtan in 2007 (Platvoet & van Rinsum 2008).

Postscript, 13.11.2017

This article, Olabimtan's response in 2003, and our reply in 2008, were subjected to a critical discourse analysis by Frans Wijsen in 2017 in order to expose the ideological intent and nature of our 'invention' of 'African religion' (Wijsen 2017).

[180] Incorrect for both Platvoet and Van Rinsum

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