

CHAPTER ONE

IDEAS

El Negro and other stories

In the spring of 2001, the River Somme in northern France burst its banks after unusually heavy rain. In Abbeville, near the mouth of the river, houses were flooded and some people had to move to temporary shelter on higher ground.

Abbeville is not the most glamorous place in France. The Somme valley does not share much in the wealth from tourism, as holiday-makers from Britain and other parts of northern Europe drive down the motorways on their way to the southern sun. The north of France in general contains a number of depressed, former industrial towns that have lost the knack of making money, whose people have had to face up to the decline of their neighbourhoods.

So, the people of Abbeville complained not just about the rain but also about the government, which they thought was not doing everything it could to cope with the emergency. Some said that there was more to the floods than was apparent. It was rumoured that the system of water distribution was being manipulated by people in positions of authority – *'them'* – to the benefit of more favoured areas. It was said that there was a pumping-station somewhere between Abbeville and Paris that *'they'* were operating to make sure the rich in Paris had just as much water as they needed, while the people of the Somme valley got the excess. Government denials were of no effect. This was what people in Abbeville wanted to believe. Some journalists who heard these rumours interpreted them as a way for the citizens of an insignificant provincial town to take revenge for years of official neglect by spreading stories about the government and about the capital city.¹

Other industrialised countries also produce rumours, not all of them directed against the government. Perhaps the best known are the urban legends that most people have heard and that are sometimes surprisingly old, like the story that there are alligators living in the sewers of New York. This rumour,

¹ Martin Sommer, 'Het gerucht van Abbeville', *de Volkskrant* [Amsterdam], 3 May 2001, summarising similar articles from the French press.

which seems to strike every generation as interesting and fresh and therefore is repeated over and over, was first recorded as long ago as 1843.²

It could be that France, with its curious mixture of old-world conservatism and advanced technology, is peculiarly subject to rumours used by the lower classes to take revenge on the country's notoriously arrogant governing elite. One of the most famous studies of rumour in any modern society was carried out by a sociologist interested in a story that was circulating in the French town of Orléans in the 1960s.³ It was said that some of the shops in the town selling clothes for women, particularly those aiming at younger customers, were being used by a gang that specialised in abducting attractive young women when they went into the changing-rooms, in order to sell them into prostitution. While they were trying on clothes, the female victims were allegedly drugged with an injection, kept in a basement, and then taken away at night to some other place. It was rumoured that Jews were responsible.

It turned out that no one was being kidnapped and that there was no such criminal conspiracy. But the absence of evidence did not prevent the story from being half-believed and passed on from one person to another. Nor did the lack of factual basis prevent the sociologist who studied the Orléans rumour from detecting in it various levels of meaning, in this case stemming from anxieties among the population of a conservative provincial town unnerved by the political and social changes of the 1960s, at a time when the sexual revolution in full swing in Paris was starting to affect small-town ideas. Middle-aged parents were worried about the sexuality of their daughters, who had taken to shopping in the new type of fashionable boutiques and buying such subversive items as mini-skirts. If there was a conspiracy afoot, organised by 'them', the mysterious manipulators of society, then surely it involved the Jews: so it was reasoned in Orléans. The atmosphere made the abduction stories both alarming and believable. The fact that France, like many countries, has a tradition of conspiracy theories, meant that the habitual scapegoats of Christian Europe were obvious candidates for the role of conspirators in this case also, in spite of the absence of any evidence whatever.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles south of France, in the southern African country of Botswana, the unusual weather patterns of early 2001 also produced their share of stories. Rumours in Botswana's capital city of Gaborone are so common that people jokingly refer to them as Radio Mall, from the name of the central shopping street. Botswana is one of Africa's few prosperous countries, but it is

² Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumeurs, le plus vieux média du monde*, Eds. du Seuil, Paris, 1987, p.49. An English version, translated by B.Fink, is published under the title *Rumors: Uses, interpretations and images*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London, 1990.

³ Edgar Morin, *La rumeur d'Orléans*, Eds. du Seuil, Paris, 1969.

also a dry place where people often talk about the absence of rain. So important are the annual rains, in fact, that one of the main duties of a Tswana ruler in the past was to perform rain-making ceremonies, much as kings in some other parts of the world used to be thought able to control the earth's fertility. During the later part of 2000, people were making their normal remarks about the dry weather and wondering when the rains would come. In January 2001, though, a new element entered into popular discussion of the weather as people returned from the New Year holiday after spending time in their home villages. They began telling each other that the rains were not coming because of the return to Botswana of the remains of a dead man known as El Negro. This was the name given by the press to the body of a Tswana man who had died in 1830, probably somewhere near the present-day border between Botswana and South Africa. His body had been exhumed shortly after burial by a pair of unscrupulous French taxidermists, who stuffed it like a big-game trophy, exported it to Europe and put it on display in a Paris shop. Later, the corpse found its way to an obscure provincial museum in Spain. There the body of El Negro stayed for over a century, surrounded by other grotesque colonial exhibits, until the preparations for the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games. At that point the existence of the stuffed cadaver of a black man – now dubbed El Negro – was publicised in international media and a lobby started pressing for his return to Africa.

The eventual outcome was the transport to Botswana in October 2000 of the bones of the dead African, mysteriously stripped of his remaining flesh, hair and other soft tissue somewhere between Madrid and Botswana. These bizarre and macabre events were the subject of much discussion in Gaborone. Many people in Botswana's capital eventually came to the conclusion that the return of the body, minus its vital organs, was related to witchcraft and that this was the reason for the failure of the rains. Some thought that it was the work of politicians from the ruling Botswana Democratic Party.⁴

Defining religion

These stories, from such different places as France and Botswana, are what would normally be called rumours. Although rumour is often ignored by analysts as a serious source of information, stories such as these contain meaning. They are about ideas. Rumours are particularly important in Africa, for reasons that should become clear in due course, and this book therefore pays due attention to them. The story of El Negro, for example, collected in Gaborone, amounts to an allegation that the remains of a man dead for over 170 years have been used by politicians to change the weather through the exercise of mystical power. This is essentially a religious idea, and indeed many of the rumours that circulate in Africa contain an element of religious thought,

⁴ Jan-Bart Gewald, 'El Negro, El Niño, witchcraft and the absence of rain in Botswana', *African Affairs*, 100, 401 (2001), pp. 555-80.

particularly when they purport to offer an explanation for some current circumstance or series of events. Religious thought provides believers with a cosmology able to provide a comprehensive explanation of the world, including theories as to why things happen the way they do. That fact alone makes religion of great political importance in any society where the overwhelming majority of people holds some sort of religious belief.

This, of course, depends on what we mean by religion.⁵ In this book we will base ourselves on the notion that religion refers to a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world. Such a definition goes back to the nineteenth-century anthropologist E.B. Tylor, who described religion succinctly as 'the belief in Spiritual Beings'.⁶ It has the advantage of implying the belief, common to religions generally, that effective communication is possible between the human and the spirit worlds. Among anthropologists, especially in North America, definitions on this line have tended to be superseded by ones emanating from sociological theories. They emphasise the social aspect of religion and its ritual expression at the expense of its ideological component. While religious belief no doubt always has some social dimension, and it is therefore important to study this, it seems to us essential to study in the first instance the ideas that motivate human action.⁷

The choice of a definition is not an arbitrary matter. A definition is an analytical tool, selected for its ability to help understand the processes under scrutiny. In the same way that a carpenter does not choose a chisel to saw wood, so an analyst of religion picks a tool in relation to the task at hand. For present purposes, that task is to understand the way in which religious thought influences political practice in Africa today. Our definition may thus be called an operational one. This is a provisional definition in that it can be adapted as new data become available. It can accommodate the distinctive features of religion in Africa – or in many other parts of the world, for that matter – and is therefore well suited to countering the Western-centred elements present in existing definitions of a more essentialist type.⁸ Classical sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber developed theories of religion with a different object from ours in their minds. Both men lived in an age when

⁵For the problems in defining religion, see Jan G. Platvoet & Arie L. Molendijk (eds), *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, concepts and contests*, Brill, Leiden, 1999.

⁶E.B. Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture*, Harper Torchbacks, New York, 1958, p.8. This was first published in 1871 under the title *Primitive Culture*.

⁷For further discussion of this point, see chapter three, note 4.

⁸Cf. Jan Platvoet, 'To define or not to define: the problem of the definition of religion', in *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, esp. pp. 260-1.

social scientists fully believed in the possibility of enunciating universal laws governing human behaviour in a manner that few of their successors would do today.⁹

Religion, in the sense we have just defined it, colours many Africans' view of reality. In the eyes of believers, reality consists not only of what can be observed in the material world, but also includes experiences of the invisible world. A leading philosopher, Kwame Appiah, argues that because of their belief in invisible agents, many Africans cannot fully accept those scientific theories that are inconsistent with it.¹⁰ Other African philosophers have suggested that Africans typically have a unified vision of reality that encompasses the invisible world.¹¹ The social arrangements in the visible world are often thought to be reflected in the invisible world. Such 'transcendental reduplication' of the material world, so common in religious belief everywhere, has been systematically eroded in Europe through the development of philosophic thought since the Middle Ages.¹² Furthermore, religious practice requires at least the perception of possible interaction between the visible and invisible worlds. This too appears to be a factor of capital importance for understanding the reconfiguration of religion and politics in the world today. For if people aspire to communicate with an invisible world, control of such communication can become a matter of the greatest political importance.

Religion thus has implications for the mundane realm of politics, famously defined as 'who gets what, when, and how'.¹³ Politics could be described less picturesquely as the activity generated by conflicts of interests and values that affect all of society, and the efforts to reconcile them.¹⁴ It is at this point that the many studies based on analysis of religious practice alone contain important data. They do not easily, however, advance a basic theoretical understanding since they leave out what most needs to be explained. Recent anthropological studies of Africa tend to see religion as a symbolic expression of destabilising forces such as globalisation, hegemonistic power in postcolonial

⁹For further discussion of this point, see below, p.

¹⁰For a discussion of the role of religion in African philosophy, see e.g. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, p.135.

¹¹Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy: A step forward in African thinking*, Paulines Publications, Nairobi, 1999, p. 11, uses the term 'vitalogy' to refer to this.

¹²Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1964, p.103.

¹³Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who gets what, when, how*, Smith, New York, 1936.

¹⁴ Cf. Bernard Crick and Tom Crick, *What is Politics?*, Edward Arnold, London, 1987, p.1.

societies, and so on. This limits religion to a passive role as a 'function of signification'.¹⁵ It ignores that religion also constitutes a field of action that believers occupy and may control. More than a reflection of external forces, religious action is a form of self-fashioning. Religious performances reconstitute people as moral subjects, using techniques that have profound historical resonance. A study of people's underlying beliefs can thus develop an understanding of how they respond to their political climate.¹⁶

The connection between religious and political ideas is, we believe, stronger in Africa, and for that matter in many other places, than is generally admitted by commentators steeped in a tradition of political thought that goes back to the European Enlightenment. Africa, like other parts of the former colonised world, underwent the influence of the Enlightenment in an indirect manner, mediated by colonial government or missionary education. In many respects politics and religion in these postcolonies remain connected in ways that have deep historical roots. Several commentators have noted this in recent years. The political analyst Edward Luttwak has noted the inadequacy of what he calls a 'materialistic determinism' that excludes religion in analysing many of the world's conflicts, and calls religion 'the missing dimension'.¹⁷ The anthropologist Jack Goody makes a similar point, arguing that religion actually trumps ethnicity as a determinant of conflict in many cases but is ignored by too many analysts.¹⁸ These observations can be applied to politics more generally, and not just to conflicts.

Thus, to return briefly to the El Negro story, the perception of a religious dimension to the world has a political aspect inasmuch as it imputes to politicians the ability to manipulate mystical powers. To judge from the currency of the rumours about El Negro, many people in Botswana find it quite credible that occupants of high state office possess abilities that many Europeans and North Americans would doubt to exist in reality, and which in any event would not be considered to have a place within the field of politics.

A study of ideas

¹⁵'...une fonction de signification': Ruth Marshall-Fratani and Didier Péclard, 'La religion du sujet en Afrique', *Politique africaine* 87 (2002), p.8.

¹⁶Ibid., pp.7-8. The article as a whole contains an incisive critique of recent anthropological work on religion in Africa.

¹⁷Edward Luttwak, 'The missing dimension', in Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson (eds.), *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 8-19.

¹⁸Jack Goody, 'Bitter icons', *New Left Review*, second series, 7 (2001), p.15.

In view of these remarks, a study of how religion and politics interact needs to draw on a number of academic disciplines, no single one of which has the right tools to treat the relevant data on its own. A particular problem arises because some of the phenomena affected or produced by the interaction of religion and politics have proved elusive to study by social scientists generally. Social science has developed through an analogy with natural science, attempting to identify precise models of human behaviour that, in theory at least, will eventually have a power of predictability as great as the theory of gravity. In the mid-twentieth century, the social science that had first arisen in European and North American centres of learning (including marxism, which was after all a European creation) was somewhere near the peak of its self-confidence, or perhaps arrogance. This was also the period when former European colonies in Africa, Asia and parts of the Americas were gaining independence. Politicians, technocrats and academics in those days pretty much agreed on the importance of state-building and economic development, and social scientists offered models for how to modernise traditional societies. In retrospect, it is clear that modernisation and development theories failed by and large to produce the type of Africa that planners and theorists had imagined.¹⁹ Not least, Western-trained thinkers largely failed to foresee the resurgence of religion, because they had made a series of wrong assumptions about the place of religion in regimes of modernisation.

Some leading critics accuse certain branches of social science of simply ignoring the relative failure of modernisation and development theories, at least as far as Africa is concerned, and just continuing as before. Regarding political science and development economics, the Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe judges that 'these disciplines have undermined the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts'.²⁰ Ignoring religion as a matter of obvious political and even economic importance, as we hope to demonstrate, is a good example of the same tendency. Political scientists and economists specialising in Africa study religion either not at all or only as far as is permitted by the conventional instruments of their disciplines, with only a few exceptions.²¹ Anthropology, however, created as a formal intellectual discipline as a result of the expansion of European interests in Africa and Asia especially, has always taken a close interest in religion. Anthropologists have examined the interaction of religion and politics in Africa but have, as

¹⁹Cf. Colin Leys, *The Rise and Fall of Development Theory*, James Currey, London, 1996.

²⁰Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2001, p.7.

²¹A francophone school of political science, strongly influenced by a wider literature of philosophy, history and anthropology, has succeeded rather better than the anglophone tradition of political science in incorporating religion in its frame of analysis. See e.g. Jean-François Bayart (ed.), *Religion et modernité politique en Afrique noire*, Karthala, Paris, 1993, esp. the conclusion.

we will suggest in more detail, often failed to consider a central element of religious belief, namely the perception that the invisible world is real.

One critic, Robin Horton, divides the anthropologists who have written on religion in Africa into three categories: the Symbolists (those who see religion as a form of representation, comparable to poetry or music); the Fideists, 'who like to think of all religious life as the expression of an autonomous commitment to communion with Spiritual Being', and the Intellectualists, in which category Horton places himself, who understand religion in Africa as 'a system of theory and practice guided by the aims of explanation, prediction and control'.²² Although there have been new developments in writing on religion in Africa since Horton first made these distinctions, his basic categorisation remains a viable one. Perhaps the main feature of the Intellectualist approach is its propensity to consider statements on religious matters in the first instance in the believers' own terms before attempting to translate these into a vocabulary more appropriate to other branches of learning. To borrow a word from linguistics, it is useful to describe religion in 'emic' terms, that is those derived from the believers' own point of view, before analysing it in 'etic', or more detached, terms that correspond more closely to a scientific approach based exclusively on the rational method of determining objective truth. It is most important to note that this does not imply that an analyst who adopts the emic form of analysis shares the religious beliefs of the people she or he studies; it implies only that the observer suspends judgement by allowing believers (in this case Africans) the right to express matters in the terms they think appropriate. This is the approach we follow here.

The precepts of social science are based to a large extent on data drawn from Western societies and European and North American history, and influential theories have been based on more or less idealized readings of what actually happened in those areas. Therefore, models of social and political action that aspire to be of universal application are too often 'actually part of a culture-specific, proselytizing ethic of what remains at heart western Christendom', as the Indian economist Deepak Lal expresses the problem.²³ One way forward would be to look again at key questions and concepts in the social sciences, this time in the light of data drawn from the full range of human

²²Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on magic, religion and science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 306.

²³Deepak Lal, 'Asia and Western dominance: retrospect and prospect', International Institute of Asian Studies Annual Lecture, Leiden, 27 October 2000, summarised in *IIAS Newsletter* 24 (February 2001), p.3. This is explored at full length in D. Lal, *Unintended Consequences: The impact of factor endowments, culture and politics on long-run economic performance*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1998.

societies. In doing this, scholars may continue to develop theories that aspire to be universally applicable, and need not cede to the idea that there are specific cultures with ideas or practices so peculiar that they can be understood only by means of disciplines equally peculiar, or only by people born into those cultures. The general debate on whether certain social and political ideas, like democracy and human rights, are universal, or whether they are proper to particular cultures or civilisations only, is one of the most important matters at issue in the world today, as we will discuss at the end of this book. We stand on the side of those who believe that the most important ideas about how people can live together are universally applicable in at least some sense, with the important proviso that they do not necessarily find the same cultural expression in every society. To be more precise, we do not believe that the study of religion and politics in Africa reveals the existence of any key concepts that are utterly unfamiliar to other societies. Far from regarding such ideas as exotic, we believe that they can be understood in terms of universal concepts. The single-word titles of our chapters are an attempt to list some of the main ideas common to both religion and politics in Africa, but which are also known in various forms in other parts of the world.

Social scientists generally rely on precise data, including statistics, of a type produced by efficient bureaucracies able to work in well-policed societies. Africa today has rather few such bureaucracies and is not well-policed, not only in the sense that few countries have effective national police forces but also in an older sense of the term, as being effectively organised through a state. Indeed, until the twentieth century the overwhelming majority of Africans lived without writing. It is useful to recall in passing that the modern ideas of 'policy' and 'police', and 'state' and 'statistics', emerged from the formation of bureaucratic states in Europe, recognizable forebears of today's massive constructions, around the seventeenth century. They seem of ever more questionable relevance to large parts of Africa and central Asia, for example. 'The most distinctively African contribution to human history', in the opinion of a leading historian, 'could be said to have been precisely the civilized art of living fairly peaceably together *not* in states'.²⁴ In view of this, Africa's history should be of greater interest to social scientists than is actually the case, for it provides a historical example that challenges some fundamental assumptions about how human beings live together.

But the more prosaic problem it raises for scholars is that Africa remains the continent where the least gets written down. This is to some extent compensated by the fact that ideas transmitted by word of mouth are more important in Africa than in most other parts of the world, no doubt because of its long oral tradition. In response, anthropologists and historians have developed techniques for considering how to extract usable information from spoken words. In this book we have relied

²⁴John Lonsdale, 'States and social processes in Africa: a historiographical survey', *African Studies Review*, 24, 2-3 (1981), p.139. We return to aspects of this in chapter eight.

greatly on expressions of popular ideas that are normally oral rather than written, but which can be accessed through pamphlet literature, the press, videos and so on.

Previous studies that explicitly examine the relation between religion and politics in Africa have tended to focus on religious institutions rather than religious ideas.²⁵ Several books have been published on, for example, the role of the churches in the democratisation process in Africa,²⁶ or on religious revival movements.²⁷ Our aim, rather, is to show how religious ideas – not just their institutional channels, but the ideas themselves – are an essential part of politics in Africa at every level. Many of these ideas have a long history, which we attempt to trace in a few cases. It could be said, therefore, that this book concerns how Africa's older historical patterns, often transmitted through religious ideas and religiously-inspired behaviour, are having an impact on its modern politics.

One of the main reasons why religious ideas have been rather little studied in their effect on politics in various parts of the non-Western world is an underlying supposition on the part of many academics, journalists and others that religion is likely to decline in its public role as the world develops. The institutional separation of church and state, or of its nearest local equivalent, has been considered a hallmark of a developed political system. The aspiration to separate religion and politics, originally a key achievement of Enlightenment thought, has been imparted to generations of intellectuals from the non-Western world as a part of the programme of development recommended to them. However, events in recent years, most particularly since the Iranian revolution of 1979, have shown how religion has been able to respond to modern politics, even if it is not always in ways that everyone might find desirable. This reason alone makes it important to study religious ideas, since these can clearly motivate large numbers of people to political action. African authors

²⁵See notably Jeff Haynes, *Religion and Politics in Africa*, Zed Books, London, 1996.

²⁶E.g. Paul Gifford (ed.), *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa*, Brill, Leiden, 1995; Laurenti Magesa and Zablon Nthamburi (eds.), *Democracy and Reconciliation: A challenge for African Christianity*, Acton Publishers, Nairobi, 1999.

²⁷E.g. on Christianity see Paul Gifford, *New Dimensions in African Christianity*, All Africa Conference of Churches, Nairobi, 1992; on Islam, René Otayek (ed.), *Le radicalisme islamique au sud du Sahara: da'wa, arabisation et critique de l'Occident*, Karthala, Paris, 1993; on revivals of traditional religion, Rosalind Hackett, 'Revitalization in African Traditional Religion', in Jacob K. Olupona (ed), *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, Paragon House, New York, 1991, pp.135-48.

seem more aware of the continuing importance of religion as a political force,²⁸ but their views have little influence outside their own continent. In Africa itself, religious ideas are often discussed by people trained in university departments of theology and religious studies, disciplines that in the West have declined in importance as theology has lost the central place it once had in academic curricula.

Hence, an analysis of religion and politics that takes full account of the work of African academics promises to open up some new theoretical approaches of obvious utility. If the reoccupation of political space by religious ideas has been most obvious in the Middle East, a similar tendency has been observable in Africa in recent decades in every one of the continent's main religious traditions: Christianity, Islam and indigenous religions. Western commentators trying to unravel the impact on politics of some of the world's most dynamic religious movements often describe them as 'fundamentalist'. This is a word that we will try to avoid as it has become rather misleading.²⁹ In regard to Christianity and Islam this has been relatively well-documented. The revitalisation of African traditional religions has received rather less attention.³⁰ The relative neglect of developments in African indigenous religious traditions may be due to the fact that these, unlike Christianity and Islam, have tended not to be discussed by academic authors as though they were 'real' religions, containing theological thought. This is no doubt largely because they lack written texts to compare with the Bible or the Qur'an. Indigenous African religions have rather been seen as social institutions or constructions that are interesting primarily for what they tell us about the social organisation of those who adhere to them. As a result, little attempt has been made to trace the development of religious ideas in Africa over time.³¹

Ideas that, in terms of formal academic disciplines, may be regarded as purely religious, are actually of great political importance if politics is seen as the debates and activities relating to the distribution of resources in society in the largest sense and not just in formal and institutional terms. Here we may offer an analogy: in the seventeenth century, one of the first Europeans to publish a lengthy

²⁸ E.g. Simeon O. Ilesanmi, 'The myth of a secular state: a study of religious politics with historical illustrations', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 6, 1 (1995), pp.105-17.

²⁹ For a critique of the notion of fundamentalism, see Gerrie ter Haar, 'Religious fundamentalism and social change: a comparative inquiry', in Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busuttil (eds.), *The Freedom to do God's Will: Religious fundamentalism and social change*, Routledge, London, 2002, pp. 1-24. We will follow some scholars of Islam in labelling modern exponents of political Islam as Islamists.

³⁰ See note 27.

³¹ Among exceptions to this is e.g. Matthew Schoffeleers (ed.), *Guardians of the Land: Essays on Central African territorial cults*, Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1978.

description of an African society based on extensive first-hand knowledge concluded that the people among whom he had lived – in southern Madagascar – had no religion. This was not because the writer in question (an official of the French Compagnie des Indes) was ignorant of Malagasy customs, but rather because he could identify no ritual, dogma or clergy that, in the opinion of a contemporary European, qualified as religion.³² In much the same way, observers nowadays risk thinking that many African countries have little in the way of politics, because the institutions and activities that, to outsiders, seem to constitute politics, are insubstantial there. Much of the real politics occurs elsewhere, in activities more conventionally considered as coming within the sphere of religion, or usually considered as ‘superstition’.

While the present book concentrates on some particular aspects of Africans' thinking about politics today, it argues that, at bottom, the problems of African societies are no different from those of any other continent. For purposes of analysis, we generally take Africa to be one single arena. Some readers may object by pointing out that African countries and societies are significantly different from each other. So they are, but Africa's ethnic diversity, which is a telling factor in certain contexts, is less so when considered in terms of world-views. Just as it is conventional to talk or write books about Europe or even the West,³³ on the grounds that geographically scattered countries with distinct histories have a great deal in common due to their heritage of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in particular, so, as we will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, there are grounds for assigning all of sub-Saharan Africa to one category for some purposes. Furthermore, we do not see Africa as a battleground between tradition and modernity. Victorian explorers tended to conceive of Africa as a continent without history and therefore without experience of change, where everything was done in a manner passed on from one generation to the next, and academic theories of development and modernisation were later invoked to justify imposing innovations from elsewhere, but it is now evident that tradition cannot be accurately thought of in this way. Tradition certainly exists in Africa, as it does elsewhere, in the sense of patterns of behaviour and understanding that are transmitted from one generation to another, or that

³²Etienne de Flacourt (ed. Claude Allibert), *Histoire de la Grande Isle, Madagascar*, 1658; Karthala, Paris, 1995, p.153.

³³The concept of the West is in many respects a political one, grouping together a number of otherwise disparate countries in Western Europe and North America, but also Japan and Australia, for example. We use it here primarily to designate countries whose intellectual life has been decisively affected by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which in some ways makes it a more exclusive category. Ashis Nandy considers that ‘The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds: *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1988, xi.

are attributed to earlier generations even when they are invented afresh. However, it is now abundantly clear that Africans experienced meaningful change before colonial times and that they have assimilated innovations easily throughout history. By the same token, they have abandoned some older practices without any obvious sense of loss.

A dynamic model of religion in Africa

It is still all too common to suppose that before colonial times, Africa consisted of thousands of distinct political or social units formerly called 'tribes', these days known more politely, but with little change in meaning, as 'ethnic groups'. It is often written or implied that each of these ethnic groups had its own 'tribal' religion: thus, there are books on Zulu religion, Yoruba religion, Ashanti religion, and so on. This conforms to the idea that old Africa was divided into thousands of micro-units, each defined by a more or less coherent set of political and cultural institutions, rather like miniature versions of the nations that Europeans had come to regard as the standard form of political organisation.

There are increasingly persuasive reasons, though, to suppose that this old-fashioned view is unsatisfactory. A helpful suggestion for a new approach to the study of religion in Africa has been made in an essay by the British historian Terence Ranger.³⁴ He considers that twentieth-century anthropologists, reacting against the false history written by their evolution-minded nineteenth-century forebears, have ceased to ask historical questions about religion altogether. Ranger therefore proposes a model of religion in Africa that both incorporates historical data and opens a perspective for the analysis of the current state of affairs. He notes that it is possible to identify extensive regions within Africa that existed in precolonial times, far exceeding the boundaries of any one ethnic group. Within these larger areas there were enduring patterns of interaction and exchange between individuals and communities. These extensive regions of contact – usually without fixed boundaries – constituted fields within which people travelled, including groups mobile by nature such as hunters and traders, for example, or pilgrims on their way to local shrines or other centres of spiritual power. This means that population groups that in many respects were highly localised, perhaps speaking a language proper to only a small area and engaged primarily in agriculture, at the same time were in communication with others much further afield. Such transactions involved an exchange of religious ideas and practices. Ranger points out that African religious ideas are to a large extent ideas about relationships. These are often conceived of as existing between the human

³⁴The following is taken from T.O. Ranger, 'African Traditional Religion', in Stewart Sutherland and Peter Clarke (eds), *The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religion*, Routledge, London, 1991, pp. 106-14, esp. pp.109-12. See also Gerrie ter Haar, *World Religions and Community Religions: Where does Africa fit in?*, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, 2000, pp. 5-12.

world and the spirit world, inhabited by ancestral spirits, spirits of the land, water or forest, alien spirits, and so on. This spirit idiom, which we will analyse in more detail in chapter three, thus posits the existence of identifiable spirit-beings.

Each set of relationships in such a wide system of contacts and exchanges implicates people at various levels of interaction and is expressed in a religious form that changes according to circumstances. Ancestral cults for example are a historical feature of many parts of Africa, expressing the special relationship that people have with their ancestors. Historians have also identified territorial cults, related to the various relationships people have to the land, or so-called 'cults of affliction', which attract people believed to have been afflicted by the same spirit. In short, there are many cults, which may overlap, intrude upon, or compete with one another, and which have arisen, flourished and disappeared over time, to be replaced by others. Drawing attention to this aspect of life in Africa emphasises not the atomisation of the continent's people both in precolonial times and today, but the social relations that have continued to integrate various types of relationship: between kin, neighbours, migrants, nomads and travellers. The networks of relationships in the past were not only those between people, but also between humans and their natural environment, including the land they cultivated or where they hunted, and the forest groves that were taboo and could not be entered. Relationships of this type were important in Africa's politics in the past and they continue to be important today, nowadays entwined with the formal politics of sovereign states.

The individual spirits that are held to govern relationships between people and objects in the material world are considered by believers to be real, even though invisible. For purposes of analysis it is not necessary to share this view of reality, but it is important to take account of it. An analogy is the helpful idea suggested by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who describes the imaginary as 'not the unreal, but the realm where the real and the unreal become undistinguishable from one another'.³⁵ Situated at this same point is another couple as difficult to disentangle as real and unreal, namely true and false.³⁶ The imaginary, we suggest, is where facts merge into non-facts; it is where perceptions of truth are formed. That which people imagine, changes over time, but certain products of the imagination recur in societies and show continuity over many generations. Even the most determinedly materialistic societies make constant use of entities that are imaginary in this sense, such as capital, the market, and the economy.³⁷ But of all forms of imagination, arguably the most influential is religious belief, which has such a well-attested history in all parts of the world.

³⁵ 'L'imaginaire, ce n'est pas l'irréel, mais l'indiscernabilité du réel et de l'irréel': Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers 1972-90*, Edns de Minuit, Paris, 1990, p.93.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See chapter six.

Tracing how certain products of the religious imagination change over time sheds light on perceptions of matters such as the moral character of power, the nature of good and evil, and similar ideas of obvious importance for politics and society in the broadest sense, many of which we will discuss in subsequent chapters. Included in the sets of relationships that constitute the fabric of society, and which change over time, are those between individuals and collectives, such as ethnic or national groups. The West today tends towards a near-obsession with the autonomous self,³⁸ a hallmark of modern industrial or post-industrial society that often makes it hard for Westerners to understand people who, as in Africa, tend to think of themselves and their rights and duties towards others primarily in terms of relations.

A dynamic model of the religious history of Africa thus offers insight into how people assimilate new religious ideas and practices and how new religious movements spread. It can include the diffusion of African religious traditions outside the continent from the days of the slave trade until today. It can also encompass within its explanatory terms historical developments in Christianity and Islam, both of which have been established for centuries in some parts of Africa and have to be considered part of the range of African religious traditions. Such a model can also incorporate data concerning Africa's insertion into the world, whether in terms of traditional religions helping slaves to survive in the Americas in the past, or of conversion to 'world religions' helping Africans to enter global markets. Not least, a historical model of this sort helps to illuminate one of the main problems in interpreting Africa's political history, namely the absence in many places of any political constructions before colonial times closely resembling the modern idea of states. Certainly, medieval Mali and Ghana and old Zimbabwe, to name three examples, all held sway over large areas, but they were not based on monopolies of the means of coercion held by centralised bureaucracies in quite the same way as occurred in Europe from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, with a formative influence on modern ideas of statehood worldwide. Some parts of precolonial Africa consisted of so-called 'stateless societies' in which governance was exercised through socially-constituted networks like age-sets and lineages, in which initiation groups and masking societies exercised significant authority. All of Africa's great variety of forms of government was associated with relationships between individuals and social groups, usually expressed in a spirit idiom. Authority over the spirit world thus translated into authority over people, making religion an outstanding instrument for exercising political power by dominating the web of relations over a wide area. Hence, in 'stateless societies', in chiefdoms and in the great empires of medieval Africa alike, political power was to a large degree exercised by people using essentially religious techniques, which enabled them also to command material aspects of power such as armed force and rights of taxation

³⁸Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and society in the late modern age*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp.32-4.

or tribute. Bureaucratic states in their modern sense hardly existed in Africa south of the Sahara until the nineteenth century, when they were created on the initiative of Europeans. All of these older traditions of governance continue to have an effect on African politics.³⁹

Causation

While religious ideas may constitute a basis for political authority, they also provide a framework for understanding the causes of events. These two functions are related. For evidence of this, we may return once more to the description of the rumours with which this chapter began. Those Batswana who wondered in 2001 why the rains had not come on time, speculated that it might be because of the machinations of powerful people using mystical techniques. This is in effect a theory of causation based on religious belief, and tends to support the view that one of the functions of religion is as a system aiming at explanation, prediction and control.⁴⁰

The story of El Negro also suggests that politicians who wish to stay powerful need to give at least the impression that they can command the vagaries of chance and climate. Politicians all over the world try to cultivate a reputation for being in full control of everything that affects public life. In the West, politicians do this in part with reference to scientific and technological expertise. In European and North American history, scientists have been overwhelmingly successful in explaining *how* things happen, but less successful in explaining *why* they happen. This may be one reason for the widespread existence of conspiracy theories even in societies with a high degree of scientific knowledge. The popularity of a vast range of conspiracy theories in the United States is testimony to this, including elaborate hypotheses about the assassination of John F. Kennedy and stories of abduction by aliens. In the Middle East, pervasive religious belief plus decades of undemocratic government have made even the most intelligent and best-educated people highly susceptible to conspiracy theories, such as that Princess Diana was murdered by the British secret services or that the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington were master-minded not by Islamic militants but by Israelis or Americans, in a monstrous manipulation of public opinion. Stories about the workings of invisible forces appear to be a universal way of attributing causes to otherwise inexplicable events, even in countries where the provision of public information is dominated by powerful corporations and where institutions of learning or of commerce proffer scientifically-validated explanations.

The stories of floods in Abbeville, abduction in Orléans, alligators in New York and El Negro in Gaborone all contain popular ideas. They are popular, however, in different ways. In a European country like France, subject to a rigorous separation of church and state for more than two

³⁹For further discussion on this point, see chapter eight.

⁴⁰ Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, p.306.

centuries, where the secular and religious realms generally are regarded as intellectually separate, rumours such as these, which can be quite easily seen to have no basis in fact, are generally regarded as a popular delusion. They are considered of mainly sociological interest⁴¹ and are rarely shared by elites. In any African country, however, and for that matter in some other parts of the world, rumours, like certain other expressions of popular belief, tend to be shared even in elite circles. Most importantly, they are more likely to be taken seriously. To call a rumour 'popular', is not to distinguish it from some idea of 'high' culture, as is sometimes done with regard to Europe, but rather to imply that it is not the property of a particular segment of society, such as a particular class or ethnic group.⁴²

Even in highly secularised European countries, then, or ones with huge expertise in science and technology like the United States, substantial numbers of people are attracted by rumours that purport to offer explanations for a particular course of events. Many such rumours refer to invisible beings, such as aliens. Or they may attribute inexplicable occurrences to the machinations of an invisible force that people believe to have effective power over their lives. This may refer to an existing organisation, such as the CIA, or to an alleged network such as an international Jewish conspiracy of the sort rumoured in Orléans, or to a personified natural force, such as El Niño. It appears that people everywhere are inclined to seek explanations for unusual or important events. This seems to imply that the more unpredictable events become, the more people are inclined to construct some theory of causation. In other words, people all over the world may be prepared to consider explanations that make reference to invisible beings or forces, which, we have argued, are at the heart of most religious belief. Considered this way, rumours become highly relevant to the study of religion.

In academies of learning, theories about why – not how – things happen are conventionally the domain of theology and philosophy. In Africa, however, this is a subject much discussed in streets, offices and homes, in the form of communication called *radio trottoir*. This subject we will turn to next.

⁴¹E.g. Véronique Champion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard, *Légendes urbaines. Rumeurs d'aujourd'hui*, Payot, Paris, 1992.

⁴²Cf. Johannes Fabian, *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and popular culture*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville and London, 1998, pp.1-3.