WHAT IS BELIEF?

Restaging the Will to Believe: Religious Pluralism, Anti-Syncretism, and the Problem of Belief

ABSTRACT In this article, I examine anthropological conceptions of religious belief by concentrating on the problems that arise in employing them in socioreligious fields characterized by pluralism, a high degree of mobility in changing religious affiliation, and by what Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart have called “anti-syncretism” (1994). Instead of discarding the concept for anthropology, however, as some scholars have proposed, I suggest that indigenous discourses referring to and practices of belief represent an important field of anthropological inquiry, particularly as concerns non-Western forms of Christianity. In this article, I argue that people's ideas of and experiences with spiritual entities engender particular ways of talking about and practicing belief. Analyzing religious practices among the Zambian Gwembe Tonga, it is shown that some conceptual problems can be overcome by shifting the focus from belief as a stable and perpetual interior state of religious practitioners to the practice of cyclically regenerating a condition of internalized “believing.” [Keywords: belief, religious pluralism, anti-syncretism, African Christianity, Zambia]

IN RECENT DECADES, statements like “the Azande believe” have become highly questionable, partly because the term belief has often been linked to essentializing concepts of “culture.” Criticism of such formulations, thus, has motivated some anthropologists to discard the word belief from their analytical vocabulary. In the anthropology of religion, however, this notion has maintained a paradoxical momentum of its own. Although it has become evident that scholarly concepts of “belief” sometimes constitute an impediment in examining religion in non-Western societies, the dissemination of Christianity has led to a situation in which religious notions propagated by Western mission societies, such as “belief,” have been taken up and, in the process, modified by indigenous people throughout the world. As empirically observable phenomenon with their own peculiarities, indigenous discourses referring to and practices of belief, thus, represent an important issue in analyzing non-Western Christianity and, furthermore, are helpful in pursuing critical reflections of anthropological conceptualizations of “belief.”

As I demonstrate in this article, common anthropological ideas about belief come up against limiting factors, especially as concerns questions of belief in pluralistic socioreligious fields and shifting or overlapping religious affiliations.1 When conducting fieldwork on African Christianity, for example, I learned that members of prophet-healing churches in the rural areas of southern Zambia were very willing to change their denominational affiliation when they were not satisfied with the performance of a particular church; indeed, the frequency of such changes was comparatively high. Many people, furthermore, intermittently participated in other religious forms like those of “traditional” herbalists and possession cults, and several took part in ritual offerings to ancestors. This high mobility in religious affiliation and the tendency to be simultaneously engaged in a variety of religious forms did not surprise me in itself, because practices of this kind have already been described in much of the literature on sub-Saharan Africa. What took me by surprise, however, were my informants’ assertions that, in whatever religious practices they participated, it was important to believe in the spirits involved, otherwise the corresponding rituals would ultimately turn out to be futile. The notion of “belief” as a prerequisite joined together what seemed to me to be
disparate, occasionally even mutually contradictory, religious practices. Against the background of what I then reckoned to be characteristics of “belief,” I was, thus, left with a disturbing question: Did my interlocutors voluntarily alter their beliefs according to the specific religious settings they attended and whenever they changed their personal religious affiliations?

In this article, I examine discourses and practices of “belief” in the context of shifting and overlapping religious affiliations. Concentrating on indigenous orientations in religious practices with curative objectives, I first argue that the empirical phenomena outlined above can best be interpreted by shifting the focus from “belief” as a stable and perpetual interior state of religious practitioners to the practice of cyclically regenerating a condition of internalized “believing.”

Second, I demonstrate how this way of practicing belief is related to particular characteristics of the socioreligious field in which it is embedded. As I show below, people in my research area were not always confident that the spiritual powers that had infused particular instances of religious practice with power would do so on every future occasion. Instead, spiritual powers were commonly assumed to be evanescent in their manifestations. When seen from an abstract viewpoint, “believing” in my research area, thus, did not denote seeking conclusive certainty in an unconditioned truth with the assistance of perpetually legitimate religious institutions or practitioners. Rather, one had to remain flexible and strive for spiritual mediation in potentially diverse religious settings. All the same, participants’ belief in a particular religious practice—that is, their certainty of its truthfulness—was always assumed to be indispensable for the effectiveness of the practice. This was an essential counterpart to the spiritual ability of the religious expert. Thus, in the context of religious pluralism—in which none of the available religious options represented a unconditioned truth with the assistance of perpetually legitimate religious institutions or practitioners. Rather, one had to remain flexible and strive for spiritual mediation in potentially diverse religious settings. All the same, participants’ belief in a particular religious practice—that is, their certainty of its truthfulness—was always assumed to be indispensable for the effectiveness of the practice. This was an essential counterpart to the spiritual ability of the religious expert. Thus, in the context of religious pluralism—in which none of the available religious options represented a permanent or universally valid authority and in which people readily shifted between different religious affiliations—the will to believe had to be constantly reproduced afresh.

This practice of restaging belief in different religious settings stands in contrast to common anthropological notions of “belief,” which, on the other hand, tend to treat “believing” and “volitional acting” as antagonistic and mutually exclusive, whereas, on the other hand, often characterizing “belief” as a condition of enduring internalized convictions relating to a noncontradictory set of religious propositions. Before delineating religious practices in my research area, I shall, thus, exemplify some major dimensions of how “belief” has been dealt with so far by anthropologists.

THE PROBLEM OF BELIEF

In anthropology, the notion of “belief” has long been controversial. Whereas some scholars, such as Edward Burnett Tylor, make “belief in Spiritual Beings” (1871:383) a crucial element in their definitions of religion and rely heavily on this term in analyzing empirical phenomena, others subscribe to Rodney Needham’s affirmation that the notion of belief is not appropriate to an empirical philosophy of mind or to an exact account of human motives and conduct. Belief is not a discriminable experience, it does not constitute a natural resemblance among men, and it does not belong to “the common behavior of mankind.”

In general nowadays, it seems problematic for anthropologists to work with the notion of “belief,” although it is equally difficult to work without it. Part of the complexity involved is naturally caused by the fact that scholars refer to different phenomena when talking about “belief,” and that they situate their analyses in different thematic and theoretical contexts. For many anthropologists, the term beliefs is almost equivalent to worldview, thus making a belief the smallest unit of culture in the sense of a more or less enduring mental and emotive attitude that conditions social practices and understandings in life. Within this conceptual framework, some scholars have examined the relationship between “belief” and “knowledge.” The debate on virgin birth in the 1960s, for example, mainly revolved around the question of whether such indigenous ideas should be taken metaphorically (Leach 1966) or literally (Spiro 1968)—that is, whether the people holding such ideas actually “know better” or not. Moreover, the discussions have given rise to distinctions between “intuitive” and “reflexive” beliefs (Sperber 1997) as well as between different degrees of belief. Referring to “belief” as if it were a bounded entity, convictions going along with certain doubts are then called “half-beliefs” (Campbell 1996). Or else “deep beliefs” are mentioned, in which an imagery of bodily incorporation is evoked: The deeper the belief, the more indisputable it is depicted to be. According to this logic, “shallow beliefs” appear to reside somewhere beneath the bodily surface of the believer, from which they can be dislodged more easily.

Such images have in common the fact that they depict belief as an internal state of social actors. This is particularly true in studies of religious phenomena in which interiority is often assumed to be a quintessential characteristic of belief. Roy Rappaport, for example, suggests that “whereas acceptance is an outward act, belief is an inward state, knowable subjectively, if at all” (1999:396). In contrast to approaches of this kind, Malcolm Ruel cautions against the tendency “to transpose what some have emphasized as the inwardness of Christian belief (faith) to the non-Christian context and use of the word” as a fallacy (1982:28). Having traced changes in the meaning of this notion in the history of Western Christianity, Ruel decides against employing the term belief when analyzing an East African “traditional” religion (1997:5). Criticism has also been voiced by scholars working on non-Christian world religions like Buddhism (Southwold 1979) and, more recently, by Deborah Tooker, an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork among the Akha in Highland Burma. Tooker points out that the Akha “unite both religious and ethnic identity into [the] single
behavioral notion [of zàṭê]” (1992:800), which thus denotes a complex cultural whole. Taking a stance against interiorizing notions of ethnoreligious identity, she explains that the Akha “did not express their religious ‘beliefs’ as ‘beliefs’” (Tooker 1992:802) but in the idiom of zàṭê, which could not be believed in but had to be carried out and therefore constituted an exteriorizing idiom.⁷

The juxtaposition between “believing in” and “carrying out” is a recurrent theme in anthropological writings about belief. Like Rappaport’s statement quoted above, “outwardness” is usually associated with acting, whereas “inwardness” is related to a state (of “belief”). On the basis of such a dichotomy, the relationship between “acting” and “believing” is then delineated in various ways. In his work on intellectualist-literalist and symbolist theories in the anthropology of religion, John Skorupski foregrounds two of the most common approaches:

Whereas the literalist emphasis is unambiguously on explaining magico-religious actions in terms of the beliefs which give them their point, and then going on to a further and independent explanation of the beliefs, our alternative theorist [the symbolist, T. K.] suggest(s) that it is the “rite” which needs to be seen as “prior” to the “belief.” [1976:11]

Belief is seen here as either a precondition or a result of religious actions. In both cases, however, belief is interpreted as constituting a state of the religious practitioners. The same holds true for conceptualizations that depict “believing” and “acting” as dynamically and dialectically intertwined dimensions, as in approaches influenced by theories of performativity (Schieffelin 1985).

In this article, I do not intend to retrace the anthropological debate on the relationship between “belief-thought” and “action-ritual,” which has already been rehearsed so succinctly by Catherine Bell (1992). What I want to point out here is that most scholars do not understand internalized “believing” to represent an action by itself, except sometimes in the sense of an action relating to the needs and emotions of the believer himself or herself.⁸ This categorical disjunction stands in contrast to how “believing” wasconceptualized among my informants in southern Zambia: For them, “belief” was quintessential to their religious practices just because it had a certain performative power directed at “the world outside,” namely the power to invoke spirits and, therefore, to invest rituals with effectiveness.

One way of coalescing “action” and “belief” to some degree has been to concentrate on “belief statements” as, for example, Needham (1972), Dan Sperber (1975), and Martin Southwold (1983) have done coming from different theoretical vantage points and reaching different conclusions. In the most pronounced version of this approach, it is argued that it is impossible to conclude from a statement of belief as to what is actually (internally) “believed” by the respective person. As a particular type of discursive practice, “belief statements” are here related to exteriority; internalized states called “belief” are said to be not accessible to the anthropologist (Sperber 1985:45). This position has its advantages because it helps to avoid many of the problems associated with “belief ascriptions,” which, according to Todd Edwin Jones, represent an “epistemologically dubious realm where the type of evidence usually gathered doesn’t really support such belief claims any better than rival claims” (2000:118). Further, the focus on “belief statements” has helped us overcome notions of coherent “belief systems,” which have long dominated the anthropology of religion: Because no authentic and consistent core of the “believer” is presupposed, the existence of multiple divergent statements of belief can be explained, even if they appear mutually contradictory on a logical plane (cf. Sperber 1975:94–95).

Given the complexity of how the term belief has been used in anthropology thus far, any attempt to deal with this notion necessarily has to focus on particular aspects of it. In the following discussion of my empirical data, I do not deal with the content of particular religious beliefs or analyze the status of “belief” in relation to “knowledge.” Situating my analysis in the anthropological debates outlined so far, for the most part I shall examine indigenous statements and discourses about belief (lusumbo). However, because these discourses depict “belief” as an internalized condition with performative power, my discussion will also question the above-mentioned distinction between “believing” and “acting.” Third, instead of concentrating solely on statements about “belief,” I shall also explore how these discourses are put into practice when people change their religious affiliations, each time attempting to restage “belief” in a new setting.⁹

SOCIORELIGIOUS SETTINGS

Located in the Southern Province of Zambia, the Gwembe Valley has long been one of the most remote regions of this part of sub-Saharan Africa. Although missionaries and British colonial administrators had already started to tour the valley around the turn of the 20th century (Colson 1960:29–30; Luig 1997:84–92), and although the local population progressively became involved in labor migration in subsequent decades, it was only much later that the Gwembe Valley experienced any real intrusion by the outside world. The artificial flooding of Lake Kariba in the mid-1950s brought about the forced resettlement of more than 57,000 people, sudden infrastructural developments, initial stages of urbanization, and the increased incorporation of the area into the market economy.

Among the many sociocultural changes that went along with these developments (Colson 1971), the evolution of a “free market of Christianity” (Luig 1997:231) is of particular relevance to the analysis being pursued here. Western missions such as the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society and the Pilgrim Holiness Church—which, in their respective spheres of influence (cf. Henkel 1989:105–111), had long retained a monopoly in Christianity in the Gwembe Valley—now started to face competition from a variety of other Western denominations and African-initiated
churches. It was now possible to choose among different Christian doctrines and practices, a possibility that provided younger people with new strategies and arguments for using Christianity as a self-empowering resource during intergenerational conflicts (Colson 1970). In this process, “traditional” religious forms, like rain shrines, possession cults, and appeasement of ancestors, were increasingly challenged. Increased skepticism in these respects went along with the diversification of religious options.

There are good reasons to assume, however, that religious skepticism and selectivity were known phenomena in the Gwembe Valley even before this denominational diversification (cf. Goody 1996). Among the Gwembe Tonga, a Bantu-speaking people with a matrilineal, segmentary, and formerly acephalous form of social organization (Colson 1960; Scudder 1962), different kinds of spirits were associated with different social groupings and domains of activity. Whereas ancestors (mizimu) were related to the welfare of lineage and family members, the spirits of local rain shrines (basanga) and those manifesting themselves through prophets (bami ba imvula) were responsible for the maintenance of the agrarian cycle within the residential area and, respectively, for the control of spatially extensive droughts, epidemics, and plagues by insects. Masabe spirits, yet again, were a variety of spirits representing, for example, “the wild,” neighboring tribes, aspects of European culture, and Western technologies. When they were repeatedly incorporated during the sessions of a possession cult, the initially affective influence of masabe spirits could be converted into having beneficial effects on the lives of individuals. As Terence Ranger has pointed out for sub-Saharan Africa, in general, the association of the Gwembe Tonga with these different types of spirit was not mutually exclusive:

A hypothetical man in precolonial southern Africa could belong successively, or even simultaneously, to overlapping networks of religious relationships: for example, he could express his control of his household through a localized ancestral cult, carry tribute to a distant territorial shrine, . . . and be an initiate of a possession cult that linked him to the men and women who lived along a trading route. [1993:74]

Like Ranger’s “hypothetical man,” Gwembe Tonga, thus, would choose which spirit to approach according to the specific problems they were faced with at that particular point in time.

In the case of afflictions that manifested themselves individually, however—on which I concentrate in what follows—functional differentiation was complicated by the fact that Gwembe Tonga tended to categorize spirits according to their outward manifestations (cf. Colson 1969:72), a practice that exposed the classification of particular cases to highly contextualized interpretations and social negotiations (cf. Colson 1977:133; Kirsch 2002a). As one of my informants expressed it, “When someone becomes sick, it is very difficult to find out why this is happening and what is responsible for it. You cannot be sure at the beginning” (conversation with author, May 25, 1993). Therefore, the therapy-managing group (Janzen 1978) was often left with the perturbing question of whether a particular instance of affliction should, for example, be interpreted as an indication of possession by a masabe spirit or whether it had been induced by an ancestral spirit that was feeling neglected by the kinsfolk of the afflicted.

The classificatory ambiguity and negotiability, thus, frequently went along with uncertainty concerning the identity of the spirit involved. This lack of certainty was usually overcome by successively invoking a variety of spirits thought to be potentially responsible for the affliction, whose cause had to be found out by a system of trial and error. During appeals to ancestors, for instance, the responsible family member addressed a number of ancestors, in turn, and asked them for help (Colson 1955:59–60, 1960:123). If the afflicted recovered after this invocation, the afflicted spirit, or at least an ancestral spirit capable of serving as an intermediary with the latter, must have been among the uttered names. A similar procedure was followed in masabe possession cults. When a patient was assumed to be afflicted by masabe, a number of songs were intoned, each of them being associated with a particular type of masabe. Once the patient started to dance or show other signs of being spiritually moved, the identity of the spirit could be inferred and adequate measures taken (Colson 1969; Luig 1992, 1993).

Two conclusions may be drawn from these observations. First, non-Christian religious practices among the Gwembe Tonga mostly evolved as systems of trial and error. In determining which spirit was responsible for a particular problem, a variety of spiritual entities were addressed in turn. Second, such acts of identification frequently constituted post hoc assessments: It was only after some publicly visible sign of improvement was discerned that the (initially simply conjectural) connection between a particular spirit and the problem to be solved could be corroborated.

This quest for the identification of the spiritual power responsible for a particular problem was complicated by the fact that the pantheon of spirits among the Gwembe Tonga did not constitute a stable set of spiritual entities. At some stage, previously active spirits disappeared into the unknown and new spirits emerged. Elizabeth Colson points out that masabe spirits were in a constant “state of flux” (Colson 1969:82), meaning that over the decades some of these spirits were forgotten, some were just remembered as names, and others suddenly showed up for the first time. The masabe spirit called “Siiclipwe,” for example, which represents the bush clearers used during the construction of Lake Kariba, only appeared in the mid-1950s (Colson 1969:85), whereas another with the name of “Suntwe,” representing a hyena, is nowadays unknown to most of the younger generations (cf. Luig 1993:113). A similar situation can be found with regard to the ancestral spirits (mizimu). Among the Gwembe Tonga, the practice of inheriting the spirits of the deceased was confined to a comparatively short sequence. Deceased individuals who were two or three generations removed from the oldest lineage members were
usually disregarded and, henceforth, placed among the forgotten, although they might later reemerge in the form of unnamed malevolent spirits (zyelo). Although it was certainly possible, people, thus, could never be entirely sure whether the spirits they had invoked some time before were still active on subsequent occasions.10

There was another factor that, for the Gwembe Tonga, complicated the invocation of spirits still further. In general, spiritual entities could only be contacted and asked for help through the mediating activities of religious experts. The expertise of the latter rested mainly on their privileged association with a particular spiritual entity. However, in the case of many types of spiritual entity, such as masabe and basangu spirits, this association was not considered necessarily to constitute a permanent or even lifelong relationship. Rather, it was assumed that spirit mediums, like rain prophets (bami ba imvula), might lose their privileged contact with the spiritual entity at any time. There was, thus, no guarantee that contact could be made with a spirit by approaching a particular spirit medium, even if one had successfully done this before. Moreover, spirit mediums were occasionally suspected of deliberately feigning possession by spirits (Colson 1969:76). Rather than credulously surrendering oneself into the hands of the religious experts, Gwembe Tonga, thus, tended to retain a certain skepticism when approaching spirit mediums.

Taken together, therefore, many non-Christian religious practices of the Gwembe Tonga involved procedures of trial and error, post hoc assessments based on indications of effectiveness, and pronounced uncertainties regarding the identity of spirits as well as, in many instances, of the human loci of spiritual manifestations. This socioreligious configuration is characterized by a great degree of relativity and selectivity, which finds its expression in the perceived need for continuous processes of interpretation and social negotiation when questions of the relationship between humankind and spiritual powers are concerned.

It is noteworthy that the dimensions of relativity and selectivity also characterized how the Gwembe Tonga appropriated Christianity. Representatives of early mission societies in the Gwembe Valley complained about the selective attitude the Gwembe Tonga displayed when it came to Christian teachings and practices (Luig 1997:93–94). “Being concerned with effects rather than with ideas” (Luig 1997:100), the Gwembe Tonga were “prepared to agree with the missionaries that the mizimu or basangu were (on certain occasions) evil spirits” (Luig 1997:105). However, this “by no means indicate[d] a general readiness to embrace the Christian faith and way of life” (Luig 1997:105).

Following Colson (1971:234), such selectivity can be understood as an expression of the local hesitancy in accepting the missionaries’ doctrine that the Christian God represents an exclusive power. Although there had been an indigenous notion of “God” (which they called “leza”) before Christianity had been introduced in the Gwembe Valley, this non-Christian supreme god had been conceptualized as a “deus remotus” to whom no cult or religious practice was directed. The selectivity with regard to early mission Christianity, thus, could be interpreted as a reflection of a particular way of aligning different religious forms alongside each other. Furthermore, according to Colson, the respective religious choices were governed by pragmatism: “Gwembe villagers are pragmatists who carry out rituals only when compelled to do so. They seek solutions for particular difficulties rather than a general remedy to forestall all difficulties, and they have little use for simple piety as such. Rituals should be effective, but there is no point in carrying out a ritual for ritual’s sake” (1971:231–232).

This statement also reflects how contemporary Christians in the Gwembe Valley tend to organize their religious affiliations. I want to argue here, however, that the quest for effectiveness should not be interpreted as a sign of a “pragmatic religious attitude” alone but also as a concomitant of the specific religious configuration described above. The felt uncertainties and ambiguities in classifying spiritual entities and identifying human mediums, as well as the resulting requirement to rely on trial and error and post hoc assessments, have not ceased with the advent of Christianity in the Gwembe Valley. Instead, some of these specific experiences and practices concerning the relationship between spirits and the human sphere have been carried over into Christianity.

**BELIEF AS INTERNAL STATE AND PERFORMATIVE ACT**

In the Sinazeze area of Sinazongwe District where I conducted most of my fieldwork from 1993–2001, there were, in 1999, 18 denominations—of which eight were engaged in prophet-healing activities. In general, these eight churches had a relatively small core of continuously involved members (bakombi), who pursued the everyday activities of the church and provided curative treatments for patients who participated only intermittently in the particular church (balwazi). According to the common understanding, such treatment presupposed that the responsible religious experts were endowed with “gifts of God” (cipego caleza)—that is, that they had a privileged association with the Holy Spirit. The patients were not pressured into becoming members, and many of them actually stopped attending the particular church after a time. When a patient’s affliction produced no improvement, the patient and the members of the therapy-managing group (basikulwazi) usually declared that, despite the church leaders’ claim to the contrary, there was no Holy Spirit in the church. The quest for therapy was then continued following a procedure of trial and error by contacting other prophet-healing churches and religious experts. Because, however, success in curative treatment unavoidably involved a post hoc assessment, patients had to persevere for some time in the particular religious practice they had chosen. Their participation was necessary not only for the religious experts to treat them but also so as to give the patients and the accompanying members of the therapy-managing group a chance to assess whether this actually was a divinely ordained religious
practice that they were following. Perhaps the religious experts genuinely had a close relationship with the Holy Spirit, perhaps they possessed no spiritual power at all, or perhaps they were actually working with another, perhaps malevolent type of spirit.

The participation of patients in prophet-healing churches was generally not marked by any rite of passage: They simply had to introduce themselves before the service and were then expected to comply with the religious practice of the particular church. It was commonly assumed that this compliance had to go along with an interest and a concentrated willingness (kusanduka) on the part of new patients. Apparent skepticism and a critical attitude toward the proceedings would interfere with attempts to contact divine entities. My informants stressed that this willingness would progressively be transformed by active participation in religious practices, such as singing hymns, praying, and dancing into belief (lusyomo), which was an essential prerequisite of repenting (kusanduka) and for the successful actualization of the Holy Spirit’s healing powers. A nonbelieving patient could never be cured. But it was not only the patients themselves who were expected to believe. Even a lack of lusyomo on the part of the accompanying representatives of the patient’s therapy-managing group was occasionally perceived to be a hindrance in healing. In one case I witnessed, the prophet-healer of a particular church announced that he was hampered in envisioning the cause of a female patient’s affliction and, thus, could not determine the appropriate curative measures because the woman’s husband, who was present, apparently had no belief. In a case that involved the treatment of small children, who in my research area were generally assumed to be incapable of believing, it was the lusyomo of the parents—and especially the mother—which was said to be indispensable.

Merely avowing one’s belief in public, however, was not considered sufficient. During church services and in other religious events, belief statements were certainly important but were considered useless unless they were backed up by an internally felt conviction. This view arose from the fact that participants in prophet-healing churches considered belief to be a precondition for spiritual empowerment. My informants repeatedly emphasized that the Holy Spirit (Muyasa usalala) and lusyomo are intricately connected to each other. As one member of the Spirit Apostolic Church expressed it: “The Holy Spirit and belief march together [lit., kusangana antomwe]. You cannot have the one without the other. Believing means feeling the power of the Holy Spirit and having the Holy Spirit means believing” (conversation with author, July 27, 1999). And even as it concerned Christian herbalist treatment, lusyomo was said to be all-important, as in the following statement by the prophet-healer of a mutumwa congregation near Sinazeze (cf. Kirsch 1998):

What heals the person is the belief that the healer has in the medicine which he uses for healing. But the patient also has to believe in the medicine which he is given by the healer. Without lusyomo, you cannot be healed. Maybe you can be healed just for a short time, but later on you will fall sick again. Because, without belief, you will not be helped by the Holy Spirit. [field notes, April 1993]

Lusyomo here is seen as a requirement for all immediate participants in religious interactions concerned with the curing of diseases. The contention that a particular patient lacked belief, thus, sometimes served as an excuse for church elders who, for some reason or another, failed to heal an affliction. This was, therefore, a strategy of self-justification when claims of spiritual ability were questioned or when promises remained unfulfilled. But this did not mean that the necessity to believe was emphasized merely by the leaders of the prophet-healing churches. Members and patients who attended only intermittently also subscribed to the idea that believing was a prerequisite to achieving curative treatment by means of spiritual powers, and they frequently even held on to this idea when participating in (apparently) non-Christian religious practices as part of their quest for therapy. The notion of “lusyomo,” thus, was transferred to socioreligious realms, the religious experts of which usually did not explicitly mention it as a precondition for actualizing spiritual powers.

SHIFTING BELIEF

How different religious practices were implicitly interconnected by this emphasis on belief is aptly demonstrated by the example of a pastor of the Spirit Apostolic Church, an African indigenous denomination with its headquarters on the plateau adjacent to the Gwembe Valley. In 1999, this pastor, whom I shall here call “Cephas,” was ascribed spiritual healing abilities and, therefore, acted as one of his congregation’s healers by, for instance, the laying on of hands, the singing of particular hymns, and the stretching out of patients’ limbs. Talking about his involvement in healing, Cephas placed the greatest importance on the fact that any weakness of belief on the part of either the healer or the patient would make curing impossible. His own healing potency was accordingly seen, in part, as an effect of his belief. Yet, while he was still a pastor in the Spirit Apostolic Church, he secretly visited other denominations because he had lost confidence in the overall leadership of his own church. Several of the religious communities he thus attended pursued practices that obviously contradicted the basic tenets that he was promoting as a church elder himself. One of these churches, for example, used herbal medicines in treating patients, a practice that was explicitly dismissed by the Spirit Apostolic Church (Kirsch 2002b). All the same, Cephas explained to me that it was important to believe in whatever spiritual activity was going on in these churches because otherwise he could not determine whether their own particular religious practices worked—that is, whether a particular church was the right one for him. This explanation was based on the assumption that the presence of nonbelievers almost automatically reduces the
congregation’s chance of coming into contact with the Holy Spirit.

Besides being a pastor in a Christian church, Cephas occasionally participated in other religious practices. When, also in 1999, the healer of a masabe possession cult treated one of his elder sisters, he was persuaded by his family to take part in the ritual singing, which is required in this type of religious practice to disclose the cause of afflictions. Again, Cephas asserted that the participants’ lusyomo in the respective spirits was indispensable for the success of the ritual. It was only “believing singers” who could actually induce the particular masabe spirit to manifest itself. The same necessity for belief was expressed when he acted on behalf of a segment of his matrilineage as the inheritor of his mother’s brother’s ancestral spirit (muzimu) as well as when he attended “traditional” herbalists (banganga), who cure afflictions with the help of spirits. Although neither the banganga contacted by Cephas during my field research in 1999 nor the masabe healer who treated his sister mentioned lusyomo themselves, by being a participant in their rituals Cephas had unquestioningly transposed basic tenets from his experience of Christian practices to other religious forms.

Cephas was not an extraordinary case. Members of other prophet-healing churches also shifted between different religious affiliations and practices. These moves were usually clandestine and treated as a private matter. People were well aware of the social pressures an individual was exposed to as concerned afflictions within the extended family. Refusing to cooperate was commonly seen as a sign of antisocial behavior and occasionally even as an indication that the individual concerned might be responsible for the affliction himself or herself through witchcraft. Knowing that they might have to participate in non-Christian curative practices themselves, church members refrained from accusing others of doing so. When a member’s involvement in non-Christian religious practices became too obvious to be disregarded, the member concerned was usually regarded as being possessed by demons. Exorcising these demons then promised to clear the ground for a new lusyomo of the right kind.

That I found ethnographic cases like the pastor’s puzzling is certainly because of prevailing scholarly assumptions about the nature of belief. According to some of these assumptions, belief cannot be genuine if its reference point is exchanged too often or too rapidly. If applied to our case study, this perspective would suggest that the pastor just feigned belief and did so repeatedly in different religious settings. Another possible interpretation is that these were instances of belief as a ritualistic “language-game.” This would imply that the pastor merely talked about belief without actually seeking to experience it. Yet, in light of the religious practices that could be observed in my area of research, these two interpretations would be highly restrictive, even derogatory: After all, practitioners like Cephas took their participation in religious ceremonies very seriously. Instances of feigned belief were known but looked on with detestation, because they were said to diminish the effectiveness of the particular rituals. Furthermore, what was being sought was a truly experienced inner state of belief: Merely professing belief in the form of a potentially uncommitted credo was not thought to be sufficient, because it would not produce the desired empowering effect.

Another explanation for these shifts in religious affiliation might be that my informants were demonstrating the truth of what many scholars have postulated to be a general social phenomenon—namely, that people believe in whatever promises to be advantageous to them. However, this would mean depicting them as unconsciously reveling in a sort of “placebo effect” of belief (cf. Hahn and Kleinman 1983; Wirth 1995) and would entail roughly denying an important aspect of their intersubjectively experienced lifeworld—namely, the “life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit” (Hammond-Tooke 1986:157). Such neglect would certainly not reflect how a well-grounded anthropology of religion should be pursued.

A fourth interpretation might suggest that these changes in religious affiliation do not involve alternations of belief at all, because the different religious practices can all be shown to follow a single unifying metacode (cf. Prins 1992). As I shall show below, actions integrating what at other times might appear to represent a religious variety can actually be encountered in my area of research. I would argue, however, that the consolidation of different religious practices should not be seen as the expression of a socially shared metacode of signification but, rather, as resulting from social constructions that blur religious boundaries situationally to make one’s behavior plausible and, thus, legitimate. But what is more important for the analysis being pursued here is that the divergences between religious forms were—despite the occasional blurrings—locally felt to be highly significant. When afflictions showed no improvement, people changed their religious affiliations precisely because the religious practices they attended were different from each other.

**COMMON DENOMINATORS AND CRUCIAL DIFFERENCES**

Before dealing with the issue of belief in the context of religious affiliations being changed because of dissimilarities between religious practices, I would like to begin by sketching two discursive strategies of situationally consolidating religious forms that at other times were deemed different.

One of these strategies involves changes in denominational affiliation and can be specified as a mode of treating Archimedean points flexibly. As already mentioned earlier, the selectivity of the Tonga with respect to church affiliation had to do crucially with the indigenous view that Christian authority cannot be permanently fixed. The fact that church elders frequently fail to contact and interact with the Christian God (leza) because of their inevitable human fallibility and the workings of evil spirits was considered a truism. Skepticism of claims to absolute religious authority,
thus, provoked constant judgment (kumuyeya yemunizezo) on the part of churchgoers as to whether a specific religious practice had been divinely ordained or not. The criteria for such evaluations, however, differed from person to person, and even from time to time (Kirsch 1998:40–46). Whereas some considered a given church to be under divine guidance, others regarded the same church as representing the abode of Satan. And when people changed from denomination to denomination, they frequently claimed that the previous church had lost its association with the Holy Spirit and had instead started to employ evil powers (madainona or muya mubi) that merely resembled, although falsely, the true Holy Spirit. This strategy implied the existence of an Archimedean point, namely the Holy Spirit, to which were ascribed purely positive qualities. Yet where to find this Archimedean point and how to identify these positive qualities were a matter of interpretation.

The second strategy was applied by members of Christian churches attending religious practices that were sometimes considered non-Christian. In 1999, for example, changing assessments of such religious practices could be found among the church leaders of the Spirit Apostolic Church. Although they normally condemned the banganga as the “devil’s assistants,” many of them had temporarily attended “traditional” herbalists at some point in their lives. This recourse to religious practices of a seemingly non-Christian kind was justified by pointing out that the respective munganga was a successful healer. According to this argument, success in healing was evidence of the munganga’s divine power, because only the Christian God could bring about any lasting improvements in one’s health. Banganga were, thus, depicted as Christians in a different guise. Other members of the same church actively participated in the sessions of a masabe cult. One young woman, for instance, was repeatedly possessed by masabe spirits and was accordingly required to dance the masabe regularly. Nevertheless, she continued attending church services. She conceded that most other churchgoers, especially the senior church elders, did not approve of her simultaneous membership of a church and a masabe cult. Nonetheless, she herself did not see this simultaneous membership as incompatible in any way. Although she admitted not having been endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit herself, she emphasized that most of what she had learned about this divine being resembled the characteristics of the masabe. She understood the Holy Spirit and her masabe to be “spiritual brothers” (conversation with author, September 7, 1999). And, because of this relationship, she said, she never fell into a trance when attending a church service. This strategy took the form of a blurring of religious boundaries in which assessing whether a particular religious activity should be classified among Christian or non-Christian practices to some extent changed according to the circumstances of contact with the particular practice.

When seen from another vantage point, however, neither strategy can explain why religious affiliations were changed where cases of affliction were concerned. Such religious flexibility can only be explained by reference to the fact that the respective religious practices were seen to be different. Seeking the cause of an illness, for example, involved a search for the right church—that is, a church that genuinely worked using the power of the true Holy Spirit, which implied dismissing those that allegedly did not do so. Alternatively, either a munganga was contacted or else one participated in a masabe possession cult, because these specialists promised a treatment different from those that had been offered by religious experts previously contacted. The plurality of the religious field, thus, was recognized.

Suggesting that we analyze plurality “from below,” Johannes Fabian defines religious pluralism as “the ability of individuals to follow more than one religious orientation at a time” (1985:139). According to Fabian, this perspective allows us to acknowledge that “exaggerated expectations regarding the logical consistency and coherence of belief systems often lead to elegant but potentially misleading descriptions” (1985:139). Ernest Gellner made a similar point in criticizing the scholarly emphasis on the consistency of religious thought. Gellner points out that the idea of a “conceptual loyalty without any option” has far-reaching implications:

It means that within it there can be no syncretism, no doctrinal pluralism, no deep treason, no dramatic conversion or doctrinal oscillation, no holding of alternative belief-systems up one’s sleeve, ready for the opportune moment of betrayal. Frankly, I do not believe this. Some savages may live in a unique, option-less world. Many do not. They transcend their condition not by reaching out to science, but through syncretism, through the simultaneous use of incompatible belief systems, or doctrinal opportunism. [1974:156]

This focus on cultural flexibility is important and foreshadows subsequent theoretical developments that foreground terms like creolization (Hannerz 1987) or hybridity (Bhabha 1994). In the light of some of these later theoretical developments, however, Gellner’s “syncretism” also appears to have particular shortcomings. According to Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, the study of religious syncretism must, first, take account of the fact that “all religions have composite origins and are continually reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure” (1994:7). The notion of “syncretism” might therefore have much less explanatory value than is often assumed. Second, Shaw and Stewart stress that scholarly attempts to recast “syncretism” are confronted with what they call “anti-syncretism”—that is, “the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the deference of religious boundaries” (1994:7).

It is particularly this latter point that has been demonstrated above to be important for the current ethnographic situation. Although all the religious practices I encountered during my field research in the Gwembe Valley can be demonstrated as being “syncretic”—given that one assumes a bird’s-eye view—they were not perceived as such by the religious practitioners themselves. When people sought therapy, different religious practices were not pursued
because they were the same but because they promised something different. These differences were the very reason why people changed their religious affiliations.

It is quite evident from the foregoing that such changes of religious affiliation can hardly be called conversions in the usual sense of the term—namely, a profound and systematic change in one’s understanding of the ultimate conditions of existence. My informants had various religious options “up their sleeve,” shifting from one to another, although whichever they participated in at a particular point in time, they assumed genuine belief to be an indispensable precondition for the particular religious practice to have an effect. Instead of being caught up in the notion of “conversion,” my informants’ religious behavior, thus, resembled, rather, what the sociologist Richard Travisano calls “alterations”—that is, “transitions to identities which are . . . permitted within the person’s established universes of discourse” (1981:244) and that do not require the absolute denial of previous identities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I have examined indigenous discourses and practices concerning the notion of “belief.” I began this article by observing that many Western conceptualizations of this notion cease to be useful when analyzing socioreligious fields that are characterized by pluralism, a comparatively high frequency of change in religious affiliation, and a tendency of religious practitioners to be simultaneously affiliated with different religious forms. The flexibility inherent in such a configuration cannot be comprehended by conceptualizing beliefs as enduring convictions related to a noncontradictory set of religious propositions. Yet instead of discarding the notion of “belief” completely—in view of the difficulties involved in transposing this notion to non-Western societies—scholarly efforts to rethink this concept will prove essential in acquiring an understanding of religious practitioners who themselves emphasize belief as indispensable for medicoreligious efficacy.

Against this background, I have tried to show how discourses and practices of belief are informed by the particular socioreligious field in which they are embedded. With regard to the present case, an analytical bird’s-eye view would depict my informants’ successive and simultaneous participation in different religious forms as a “pastiche religion” (Roof 1993, 1996). In applying a processual perspective, however, a notably different picture emerges: Given that locally religious truth did not reside permanently in any one religious institution—because the empowering spirits were experienced as evanescent entities—occasionally changing one’s religious affiliation was considered inevitable. People in my area of research, thus, engaged in an incessant quest for religious truth and effectiveness in a highly dynamic socioreligious setting in which truth and effectiveness represented fleeting momentums.

It might, thus, be concluded that the practice of belief found in a particular socioreligious field is influenced by how people there experience their relationship with spiritual entities. Because in the Gwembe Valley the spiritual realm was characterized by dynamic permutations, one’s beliefs had to remain flexible. Conversely, the fact that the predominating conceptions of “belief” in the West tend to stress permanency and consistency might be connected with the fact that the Christian God is usually represented in the West as eternal and unchanging. Particular practices of belief evolve in accordance with how the source of religious truth is thought of and experienced to be.

The changes in religious affiliation described above represented willful acts and were governed by pragmatism. There was also a certain voluntarism involved with regard to belief, although it only referred to activities undertaken to attain belief. Pragmatism and voluntarism, thus, did not mean that there was no notion of “internalized belief.” Because it was taken for granted that religious practices could only be made effective if one genuinely believed in the spirit involved, any kind of skepticism ideally had to remain outside the particular socioreligious setting. In whichever religious practice one chose to participate, one had to take it seriously and believe in it, because otherwise one would never see whether it worked. Making selections among different religious forms thus constituted voluntary acts aimed at the situational development of a condition of “internalized believing,” which, in its turn, was regarded as being endowed with a certain performative power. Believing meant acting. Certainly the outcome of the particular religious practice was always uncertain, as was whether one’s belief would actually grow at all through participation. But what was important was one’s own personal readiness to restage the will to believe.

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NOTES

1. Largely stimulated by Stephen R. Warner’s article “Work in Progress toward a Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States” (1993), in recent years the sociology of religion has also dealt with this problem. See, for example, Ammerman (1997) and Bankston (2002).

2. Fieldwork on African Christianity in the Southern Province of Zambia was conducted during a total of 17 months in 1993, 1995, 1999, and 2001 and was supported financially by the Free University of Berlin (1993), the German Academic Exchange Service (1999), and the German Research Foundation (2001). The data presented in this article were collected through informal conversations, narrative interviews, and prolonged periods of participant-observation. My participant-observation of (Christian and non-Christian) religious practices always meant accompanying someone who, in some way or another, was involved with African indigenous churches. My analysis, thus, does not reflect the perspective of those Gwembe Tonga who have nothing to do with African Christianity.

3. My analysis in this article focuses solely on medicoreligious practices and, more particularly, on the treatment of afflictions in which spiritual powers are assumed to be involved. It consequently does not deal with hospitals, rural health centers,
or instances of self-treatment through allopathic medicine like painkillers.

4. The expression “the will to believe” echoes the title of an address given by William James to the philosophy clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. James’s lecture, “The Will to Believe” (1956), which was first published in 1896, takes up an issue that has commonly been dealt with in the philosophy of religion under the heading of “Pascal’s wager.” According to the French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1666), religious beliefs cannot be proved by rational means. Yet, because the benefits of believing are (potentially) greater than of not believing, believing represents a rational option. If the belief eventually turns out to be not true, nothing is lost, whereas if it turns out to be true, everything is gained. Pascal, thus, concludes that one should “wager on God” and endeavor to develop belief in the Christian God through participation in religious practices. Although I will not elaborate on this any further here, I hope that the striking resemblance between this argument and the religious practices in my research area will become clear in the course of this article. For contemporary discussions of “Pascal’s wager” in the philosophy of religion, see, for example, Jordan (1994) and Saka (2001). To my knowledge, James’s “will to believe” has not yet been applied in anthropology, the only exception I know of being an early mention of this expression by Robert Marett, who rather derogatively writes about “primitive magic”: “For those whom Marett calls primitive, “Symbol and ulterior reality have fallen apart… but his ‘will to believe’ builds a bridge from one to the other” (1997:49).

5. For a discussion of the relationship between “belief” and “knowledge” in the field of medical anthropology, see Good (1994).

6. Like Ruel (1982), here I shall not differentiate between belief and faith. For a treatment of these terms in the historical context of ideas, see Smith (1979).

7. The critique concerning the notion of an “interiorized belief” in analyses of non-Christian religions has led some scholars to concentrate on indigenous forms of “orthopraxy.” Michael Rhum, however, cautions that “A cultural emphasis on orthopraxy… does not by itself tell us much about that culture’s valuation of internalization; what it most likely tells us about is its valuation of action-orientation. Orthopraxy could well be a statement that acts are indicators of motivations” (1993:801).

8. A good example of an author holding the latter perspective is Raymond Firth, who writes the following about beliefs: “They are active weapons of adjustment by the person who holds them,” the term personal adjustment meaning the “continual process of striving for order by the individual in his relations on the one hand with his physical and social universe, and on the other with his own logical system of categories of thought and his own set of impulses, desires and emotions” (1948:26–27).

9. Up to this point in my argument, I have often put the words belief and believing in quotation marks where the sociocultural and theoretical relativity of these terms requires stressing. However, in the following ethnographic description of how belief (lusyomo) was practiced in my area of research, I shall invariably dispense with the quotation marks.

10. Compared to what has been described for the Gwembe Tonga in the 1950s and 1960s, the importance of appealing to ancestors and basangu spirits has significantly declined in recent decades. Nonetheless, most of my informants still had some personal experiences with rituals addressing ancestral spirits and some knowledge of the religious practices associated with basangu spirits.

11. With regard to the mission’s medical activities, Luig (1997:106–109) mainly interprets such selectivity as an effect of disagreements between the missionaries’ allopathic concepts of illness and the locally prevailing holistic approaches.

12. Referring to non-Christian religious practices among the Plateau Tonga, Colson (1962) also remarks that a degree of consensus among the religious practitioners was considered indispensable because conflicts were thought to make the summoning up of spiritual powers impossible.

13. It is noteworthy in this context that the confession of sins was almost nonexistent in the African indigenous churches I attended during my field research, the sole exception being the African Apostles of Johane Maranke, where churchgoers had to confess their sins publicly before entering the area where services were held.

14. The close relationship between herbal medicine and the Holy Spirit is also evident in the fact that healers are usually said to acquire their knowledge of what type of medicine to use for what type of affliction, as well as where to find the respective herbs, through dreams induced by the Holy Spirit.

15. A similar strategy of deflecting responsibility has been described by Heike Behrend (1999) in her book on Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement. Those adherents of the movement who were killed in fighting with Ugandan government forces, even though they had taken “protective medicines” beforehand, were said to have lacked faith in that particular medicine.

16. Referring to non-Christian religious practices among the Gwembe Tonga, Colson remarks: “Indeed, Tonga are remarkably tolerant of a lack of belief even in those carrying out a ritual. It is the form that matters rather than the thoughts of the performer” (1971:214). In the period before the proliferation of Christian churches in the Gwembe Valley, the religious practitioner’s lusyomo, thus, had not been a prerequisite in, for example, appeasing ancestral spirits.

17. For a detailed ethnographic analysis of the Spirit Apostolic Church, see Kirsch (2002b). Names of informants, as well as the name of the church itself, have been changed to keep them anonymous.

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