CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches

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Key Words African Independent Churches, Pentecostalism, Africanization, globalization, public sphere

Abstract Taking as a point of departure Fernandez’s survey (1978), this review seeks to show how research on African Independent Churches (AICs) has been reconfigured by new approaches to the anthropology of Christianity in Africa, in general, and the recent salient popularity of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCCs) in particular. If the adjectives “African” and “Independent” were once employed as markers of authentic, indigenous interpretations of Christianity, these terms proved to be increasingly problematic to capture the rise, spread, and phenomenal appeal of PCCs in Africa. Identifying three discursive frames—Christianity and “traditional religion,” Africa and “the wider world,” religion and politics—which organize(d) research on AICs and PCCs in the course of the past 25 years, this chapter critically reviews discussions about “Africanization,” globalization and modernity, and the role of religion in the public sphere in postcolonial African societies.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since African Independent Churches became a central research focus for anthropologists in the 1960s, these churches have not only formed fascinating research locations but also have been major sites for more general theoretical reflection and innovation in anthropology. Classical works published in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Fabian 1971, Jules-Rosette 1975, Peel 1968, Sundkler 1961 [1948]) showed how African Independent Churches or movements instigated the development of alternatives to the then still dominant structural-functionalist paradigm, which failed to address “social change” in a theoretically adequate way (see also Fabian 1981). As this vast interdisciplinary research field has been surveyed up to the mid-1980s (Fernandez 1978, Ranger 1986; see also Jules-Rosette 1994), this review is confined to the past 25 years. It does not aim to present a comprehensive survey but seeks to highlight some major trends from an anthropological perspective. In this period, the study of African Independent Churches (AICs), or, as some prefer to call them, African Indigenous Churches (e.g., Appiah-Kubi 1981) or
African Initiated Churches (Anderson 2001), has been considerably reconfigured, empirically as well as theoretically. Nothing can better evoke what is at stake than the salience of the contrast between the familiar image of African prophets from Zionist, Nazarite, or Aladura churches, dressed in white gowns, carrying crosses, and going to pray in the bush, and the flamboyant leaders of the new mega-churches, who dress in the latest (African) fashion, drive nothing less than a Mercedes Benz, participate in the global Pentecostal jetset, broadcast the message through flashy TV and radio programs, and preach the Prosperity Gospel to their deprived and hitherto-hopeless born-again followers at home and in the diaspora (Marshall-Fratani 2001). Although it would be too simple to assume that the latter simply replaced the former, the emergence of these new figures suggests that the appropriation of Christianity in Africa has entered a new phase. If in the 1980s Independent Churches were found to be attractive, by African Christians as well as researchers, above all because they seemed to offer a more “authentic,” Africanized version of Christianity than do the presumably Western-oriented mainline churches, current Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (PCCs) appear to derive their mass appeal at least partly from propagating a “complete break with the past” (Meyer 1998a, Engelke 2004). Dissociating themselves from both mainline churches and African Independent, or as they call them, “Spiritual” Churches, the new PCCs promise to link up their born-again believers with global circuits. Although PCCs gain an ever-increasing number of followers, also from the older AICs, anthropologists—and, for that matter, missiologists and African theologians—have only recently and reluctantly started to study them. This hesitance, of course, stems from the fact that anthropologists, by the nature of their discipline, were usually attracted by cultural difference and authenticity, whereas religious scholars had a strong interest in Africanization or “inculturation.” PCCs, with their intensive links to transnational circuits, in particular to American televangelists, and their enthusiastic drive to proselytize nonbelievers (researchers included), were difficult to accept as viable objects of study.

This chapter seeks to highlight not only the shift from AICs to PCCs as new foci of empirical study but also the conceptual transformations to which it gave rise. In the first section, I show how anthropologists’ understanding of AICs changed in relation to new approaches in the study of Christianity in Africa. I argue that PCCs’ spectacular rise raises important theoretical questions and renders the adjectives “African” and “Independent” increasingly problematic. Three subsequent sections place particular emphasis on discursive contexts that have been major frames organizing research in the period under review: (a) the relationship between Christianity and “traditional religion” and the question of Africanization; (b) the relationship between Africa and “the wider world” and the question of globalization; and (c) the relationship between religion and politics and the question of religion in the public sphere. My main concern is to show how these frames have been reconfigured in the period under review, and in particular by current research on PCCs, and to indicate fruitful avenues for further research.
RECONFIGURATIONS: FROM AFRICAN INDEPENDENT TO PENTECOSTAL-CHARISMATIC CHURCHES

Fernandez’s earlier overview (1978) in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* marks the transition in the study of AICs or movements from a focus on typologies and taxonomies and crisis cults to a more critical-reflexive and ethnographic approach. Critiquing earlier socio-structural as well as the Marxist-inspired approaches that were en vogue in the 1970s (e.g., Van Binsbergen 1977, 1981), Fernandez argued that researchers’ analytical terms and concepts tended to impose Western categories on rather than revealing much about these movements: “My point is, and I think it is a very anthropological one, our real enlightenment lies not in the application of imageless ideas exported from the West, but in beginning with African images and by careful method learning what they imply—what is embedded in them” (Fernandez 1978, p. 215). Calling for the study of these movements at a grassroots level, he expressed his support of the “new historiography” represented by Terence Ranger cum suis (Ranger & Kimambo 1972). He sought to stimulate anthropologists to study African religious imaginations by striving to discern their inherent “argument of images,” that is, the way in which people face deprivation and achieve revitalization by redeploying “primary images of body and household, field and forest life” (Fernandez 1978, p. 228). His own work on the emergence of the syncretist Bwiti religion among the Fang (Gabon) (1982, see also 1986) is a magisterial example of this approach, which had a major impact on subsequent research and was a matter of much debate (Fernandez 1990; Schoffeleers 1986; Werbner 1985, 1990).

If Fernandez made a strong plea for semantic or symbolic ethnography to replace social-structuralist approaches, in the Introduction to their influential collection Van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers (1985) argued for the necessity to integrate both of these as a precondition for a better understanding of religious movements in Africa. As the contributions to their collection clearly document, since the mid-1980s both strands have certainly come closer together. This quest for integration also stood central in two ground-breaking monographs: Jean Comaroff’s *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985) and Karen Fields’s *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (1985). Both works, in their own manner, offer insight into African religious practices and symbolic universes on the basis of detailed empirical research and explore the relationship between religion and politics in a new imaginative way, without reducing the former to the latter or maintaining a Durkheimian view of religion as underpinning societal order (see also Werbner 1985). Examining the ways in which the British colonial administration perceived outbreaks of Watchtower activities in Malawi and Zambia in the first three decades of the twentieth century as a major political threat, Fields showed how baptism, speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing actually operated as effective political tools. Her work challenges the often-implicit distinction between religion and the secular, which assumes that politics and religion essentially belong to separate spheres, and it shows that such a separation did not exist in colonial Central...
Africa, colonial officials’ claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Questioning the very basis on which the (in practice untenable) distinction between religion and politics thrives, Fields was able to show that religion was a continuously contested part of the ideology of colonial modernity. Similarly, in her exploration of Tshidi’s material and symbolic struggle in the South African–Botswana borderland to act on the global and national forces that shape their lives, Comaroff argued for the necessity to focus on colonial encounters between Western and local forces. She thus integrated “what Fernandez calls the imageless concepts of mode of production, class formation and underdevelopment with a profound exploration of the argument of images in Tshidi Zionism” (Ranger 1986, p. 12). Although she only engaged with Fernandez’s approach in passing (Comaroff 1985, p. 170), she clearly moved beyond his rather narrow understanding of ethnography as being geared to African cultural and symbolic repertoires and the essentializing opposition between Africa and the West on which it thrives. In so doing she laid the base for her and John Comaroff’s later work (1991, 1997), which reframed the project of ethnography as not merely a thorough study of the Other but as a detailed investigation of the zones of contact between Africa and the West. Central to this investigation stand the material, social, and cultural possibilities and constraints articulated in the “long conversations” between Western missionaries, traders, and administrators and local people, which took off in colonial times and have continued ever since.

The studies by Fields and Comaroff also signal a growing awareness of the need to situate AICs in a broader historical, social, and cultural frame. As Ranger explained in his sophisticated overview, the treatment of Independent churches, missionary Christianity, and traditional religion in isolation from each other was “artificial and distorting” (1986, p. 49). He stresses that the study of AICs tended to draw too strong a contrast with traditional religion, and to misrepresent the former as the sole suitable laboratory for social change, whereas the latter was perceived as static and hence merely a nostalgic point of reference doomed to disappear (Ranger 1993). Ranger also argues that an exclusive focus on AICs implies a far too rigid contrast between presumably more “authentic” AICs and Westernized mainline churches perceived as the ideological superstructure of colonialism and hence as familiar and not worthy of anthropological study (Ranger 1987). This contrast, he shows, was challenged by the fact that religious revival movements occurred in mainline churches at the grassroots level (e.g., MacGaffey 1983), whereas AICs experienced processes of institutionalization and routinization, in the course of which “pastors” started to assume a more important role than did the prophets who had initially broken away from mission churches (e.g., Probst 1989).

The realization that it is fruitful for anthropologists to focus on Christianity, or even religion, in Africa as a dynamic field, in which so-called AICs, mission, or mainline churches and traditional religion are in ongoing exchange, conflict, and dialogue with each other, changed the ways in which anthropology and African theology constructed their research object. In the aftermath of a large conference organized in Jos (Nigeria) in 1975, which resulted in the famous Christianity in
Independent Africa (Fasholé-Luke et al. 1978), the scope of research gradually broadened from the study of AICs to the history and anthropology of Christianity in Africa [e.g., James & Johnson 1988, Spear & Kimambu 1999; see also Hastings’ (2000) perceptive overview]. Most notable in the field of history are the accounts by Hastings (1979, 1995), Isichei (1995), and Sundkler & Steed (2000), which take as a point of departure African agency (see also Gray 1990, Maxwell 1997, Salaome 1996). As mission or mainline churches were no longer considered solely the domain of theologians and missiologists (Beidelman 1982, Etherington 1983), they became a new study object for anthropologists and historians (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1997; Etherington 1996; Landau 1995; Meyer 1999; Peel 1990, 1995; Pels 1999; Ross & Bredecamp 1995; Ter Haar 1992). These historical-anthropological works do not take for granted the mission of Western-derived churches, but instead explore them with the same historical and ethnographic vigor as so-called AICs. The question of how to account for African evangelists’ own narratives and agency without neglecting the Western part in the encounter nor reinscribing colonial power claims to the history of Christianity in Africa gave rise to much debate (Peel 1995, Comaroff & Comaroff 1997).

Although many anthropological studies focus on plural religious fields, taking into account dissenting voices and conflicts (Middleton 1983, Schoffeleers 1985, 1994; Werbner 1989; Maxwell 1999a; Meyer 1999), most publications still concentrate on a single movement or organization (see Spear & Kimambo 1999, Blakely et al. 1994). A more elaborate engagement with Islam as part of these fields is still very scarce (but see Peel 2003, Sanneh 1996), though this shortcoming has been signaled by several authors (Maxwell 1997, p. 147; Hastings 2000, p. 42). Strangely, the term Independent remains current even after scholars broadened their research focus and questioned the usefulness of the opposition between Western missionary concepts and practices and their indigenous appropriation in AICs. Maxwell (1999b) notes that Christian independency, originally a colonial term to designate Christian movements lacking white supervision, does not make sense in the postcolonial era. The use of a supposedly neutral terminology, initially employed to mark the difference between “authentic” AICs and “foreign” mission churches, fails to acknowledge the interrelatedness of these supposedly different kinds of organizations.

The study of AICs was reconfigured not only by researchers’ awareness that these churches were part of a broader field, but also by the salient popularity of new PCCs from the 1970s onward. Initially, these African-founded, yet globally oriented, PCCs were not regarded as suitable objects of anthropological study because of their presumed link with Western conservatives and fundamentalists. This link intrigued Gifford (1987, 1991), prompting him to conduct his early research on the influence of European and American evangelists on PCCs in Southern Africa (see also Arntsen 1997). According to the latest edition of the World Christian Encyclopedia (Barrett 2001, see also Anderson 2001), in 2000 there were 83 million Independents and 126 million Pentecostal-charismatics in Africa. Although these categories partially overlap, the figures exceed earlier projections by far. If

The World Christian Encyclopedia’s confusion about the use of categories such as AIC and PCC shows how difficult it is to capture with adequate terms the diversity of Christianity in Africa. If for good conceptual reasons (Fabian 1981) anthropologists pleaded to use “movement” rather than “church,” African Christians seemed to prefer the latter term, presumably because of its more solid, official connotations. In describing themselves and others, they tend to adopt categories such as mission or mainline church, AIC or PCC. AICs, in particular, increasingly came under attack by the fast-growing PCCs (both in terms of membership and sheer number), which were founded by and organized around the personality of a charismatic African leader and remained institutionally independent from, though they had strong links to, Western Pentecostal churches. To view the popularity of Pentecostalism as an entirely new phenomenon would be mistaken. Although Pentecostal churches, such as the Assemblies of God or the Apostolic Church, played a role in the African Christian scene since the 1920s, scholars did not draw a strong distinction between these churches and AICs until around 1990. Southern African AICs especially developed typical Pentecostal features such as glossolalia (Daneel 1970, Sundkler 1961) and scholars took them as paradigmatic of African Pentecostalism (Cox 1994a,b). At the same time, many AICs straddled the typological divide and recast themselves as Pentecostal churches (Meyer 1999, Maxwell 2001, Ukah 2003a). What is new is the fact that the hitherto blurred typological distinction between AICs and Pentecostal churches became increasingly polarized in the course of PCCs’ massive expansion.

Therefore, scholars should not take for granted these classifications, but instead understand them as part and parcel of a politics of self-representation. Pentecostal rhetoric about the disappearance of AICs notwithstanding, these churches persist and attract followers and researchers (Adogame 2000, Dozon 1995). Especially in South Africa, Zionist Churches still have a mass appeal (M. Fraehm-Arp, unpublished manuscript; Gummer 2002; Kiernan 1992, 1994; Niehaus et al. 2001), although growth of PCCs is on the rise (M. Fraehm-Arp, P. Germond & I. Niehaus, personal communication)—an issue that calls for detailed future research. More in general, quite similar to AICs, PCCs stress the importance of the Holy Spirit above biblical doctrines and provide room for prophesies, dreams and visions, speaking in tongues, prayer healing, and deliverance from evil spirits. The attraction of charismatic Pentecostalism throughout Africa is not confined to PCCs, but also materializes in prayer groups in the confines of established Protestant Churches, the charismatic renewal in the Roman Catholic Church, and nondenominational fellowships that born-again Christians attend without leaving their churches (Asamoah-Gyadu 1997, Ayuk 2002, Meyer 1999, Ojo 1988, Ter Haar 1992, Milongo 1984). Therefore, a crude distinction between AICs, PCCs, and mainline churches is as problematic as the earlier “taxonomic games”
distinguishing types of AICs, which has been critiqued by Fernandez (1978) and Fabian (1981). Nevertheless, the PCCs of the 1990s are characterized by a distinct form, in terms of scale, organization, theology, and religious practice, and this distinct form warrants investigators seeing them as a new phenomenon (Corten & Marshall Fratani 2001; M. Fraehm-Arp, unpublished manuscript; Gifford 1998). Although they should not be approached as a monolithic entity—fission seems to be intrinsic to Pentecostalism and hence a broad spectrum of PCCs with differences in doctrinal emphasis and style exists throughout Africa (Martin 2002, p. 176)—they clearly share a number of significant family resemblances.

Because there has been little systematic, comparative research on PCCs in different African countries (but see Gifford 1998), it is not easy for anthropologists to explain why PCCs arose earlier and on a more massive scale in British ex-colonies, such as Ghana and Nigeria. The rise of PCCs depends at least in part on a plural religious arena and the existence of AICs, against which PCCs define themselves. Important historical factors to be considered concern differences between religious cultures in Anglophone and Francophone ex-colonies and the extent to which states endorse or reject religious pluralism (Barrett 1968), as well as the predominance of Islam. Conversely, the fact that PCCs eventually did become increasingly popular in several francophone countries such as Togo, Benin, and Cameroon, whose Catholic elites for long distrusted Pentecostalism for “tending to draw its adherents into a mainly Protestant, U.S.-oriented, anglosphere” (J. Peel, personal correspondence), also calls for explanation. As Konings (2003) suggests in accounting for the long-term absence and yet the recent rise of PCCs in Cameroon (2003), political liberalization, resulting from implementation of International Monetary Fund–instigated forms of good governance and democratization, forms a key condition for PCCs’ successful manifestation and massive mobilization of followers (see also Laurent 2001a, Mayrargue 2001).

What is distinctly new about PCCs is their propagation of the Prosperity Gospel and their strong global inclination. Their names, which often refer to the church’s aspired “international” or “global” (out)reach, highlight PCCs’ aim to develop and maintain international branches in other African countries and the West, and to deploy notions of identity and belonging that deliberately reach beyond Africa. In this sense, PCCs are a global phenomenon that calls for comparison with similar churches in other parts of the world, most notably South America. As is shown in more detail below, much current research on PCCs explores the personal, cultural, political, social, and economic dimensions of being born-again, as well as the ways in which the upsurge of these churches is related to the crisis of the post-colonial nation-state, transnationalism and diasporic culture, the rise of neo-liberal “millennial capitalism” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001), and mass-mediated popular culture.

If Fernandez (1978) could still state that religious movements (in any case those like Bwiti), though giving “evidence of a successful adaptation to the modern world,” “remain community enterprises within, resisting modernization in the capitalist sense” (p. 217), obviously current Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches do
not engage in this type of resistance and, on the contrary, even seem to eagerly embrace capitalism. Such empirical shifts demand new theory and, against the backdrop of the fact that many churches act on a transnational scale, new methods. Thus, within a span of 25 years, Fernandez’s plea to turn to African imagery as a prerequisite for a true understanding of AICs collided with the realization that the condition for understanding Pentecostalism’s appeal and impact lies in moving beyond, or at least problematizing, “African” and “Independent” as taken-for-granted categories (Appiah 1992, Mudimbe 1988). Whereas Fernandez’s point to conduct an ethnographic study of African religious imaginations may have been well taken at the time, it proved to be problematic in the long run because of the rather essentializing understanding of the attribute “African” on which it depends. The seemingly “un-African,” globally inclined PCCs challenge the usefulness of the notion of “African” as a marker of cultural difference and call for a reformulation of the major discursive contexts through which AICs have been approached.

CHRISTIANITY AND “TRADITIONAL RELIGION”

A major discursive context framing research on AICs focuses on the relationship between Christianity and “traditional religion.” As intimated in the Introduction, for a long time the research interests of anthropologists, missiologists, and African theologians converged on the issue of Africanization, and this convergence opened up a space for interdisciplinary debate, above all in the Journal of Religion in Africa. Although there has never been an agreement among scholars as well as religious practitioners about the appropriate nomenclature (terms like Inculturation, Indigenization, Contextualization, Africanization, or African theology were all in circulation), the key concern was the search for an “authentic African expression of Christianity” (Mbiti 1980, Ojo 1988, Wijsen 2000). Phrases such as Traditional Religion and Christianity: Continuities and Conflicts (the title of the second part of the collection Christianity in Africa by Fasholé-Luke et al. 1978) pinpoint a particular discursive context that informed both religious scholars’ seemingly irresolvable question, “how to be Christians and Africans at the same time,” (Appiah-Kubi 1981, Baéta 1968, Mugambi 1996, Sindima 1994) and anthropologists’ understanding of AICs as the backbones of African authenticity [or even as “surrogate tribes,” as Fabian (1980) put it critically]. The dualism of these reified categories, Christianity and traditional religion, has been criticized increasingly for its inherent, unquestioned assumptions, which misrepresent African religious traditions as static, mission churches as alien(ating), and AICs as syncretically mixing elements from both yet ultimately rooted in and geared toward traditional culture. Such a view not only neglects African agency in processes of conversion in the context of mission churches, but also is unable to acknowledge the extent to which AICs actually oppose(d) traditional notions and practices and incorporate(d) key notions “from outside,” as has been documented in many older anthropological studies of AICs (without, however, being sufficiently theorized). Ranger (1987) argues that “we should see mission churches as much less alien
and independent churches as much less ‘African’” (p. 31) and acknowledge the extent to which AICs derive inspiration from revivalist movements within mission
churches and in the context of European and North American Pentecostalism (see

Recently, the notion of Africanization has been problematized. In my historical
and ethnographic work on local appropriations of Christianity among the Ewe
in Ghana I have sought to point out (Meyer 1992, 1999) that it is a mistake to
view Africanization as solely confined to AICs or to design it “from above” into
new theological programs (as was the case with the then acting moderator of the
Evangelical Presbyterian Church where I conducted my research). Africanization,
understood as appropriation of Christianity at the grassroots level, has been an
integral component of the spread of missionary Christianity from the outset. This
 “[A]fricanization from below” came about through processes of both translation
into the vernacular (Sanneh 1991) and the diabolization of Ewe religion (and
its construction as “heathendom”), thereby merging nineteenth-century popular
missionary Christianity and local religious practices and ideas. Old gods and spirits,
and also witchcraft, continued to exist as Christian demons under the auspices
of the devil. Hence, in addition to investigating African ideas about God or the
positive convergence of African and Christian notions, I argued for the need for
scholars to consider also the negative incorporation of the spiritual entities in
African religious traditions into the image of the Christian devil as part and parcel
of local appropriations. In this way, the “old” and forbidden, from which Christians
were required to distance themselves, remained available, albeit in a new form (see
also Droz 1997).

Hence it makes little sense to use Africanization in a singular manner and
reserve it for the AICs, as was the tendency among anthropologists, or affirm the
need for Africanization in theology, as was, and still is, the tendency among many
African theologians and missiologists (e.g., Bediako 1995, but see Onyinah 2002).
Such a broad understanding of Africanization, as not simply entailing a positive
incorporation of tradition or its revival (often referred to with the biblical trope of
“old wine in new skins”), pinpoints the necessity for scholars to revise the view
of AICs as the sole sites of successful, “syncretic” combinations of traditional
religious and Christian elements.1 It means also that an understanding of tradition
in terms of more or less incorporable elements belonging to the past was found
to be much too static. Nevertheless in the period under review here, it seems that
a sophisticated treatment of African religious traditions in relation to Christianity
is still relatively scarce (but see MacGaffey 1983; Maxwell 1999a; Peel 1992,
2003; Schoffeleers 1994; Werbner 1989). This lack may be due to the fact that,

1Much more could be said about the politics of use of the term syncretism, which was often
employed by representatives of mainline churches in a pejorative manner, so as to designate
AIC Christian understandings as impure and deviant. Conversely, anthropologists tended
to celebrate syncretism as an achieved synthesis of foreign and indigenous elements (for a
useful critical discussion see Stewart & Shaw 1994).
from a Christian perspective, local traditions are often viewed in a temporalizing perspective, which denies traditional religion its “coevalness” (Fabian 1983) with Christianity, allegedly the religion of modernity par excellence (Meyer 1998a, Steegstra 2004). For a long time, scholars have rather uncritically reproduced this temporalizing device, thus still echoing Sundklers (1961) view of AICs “as the bridge over which Africans are brought back to heathendom” (p. 297).

More general debates about the “invention” or “imagination of tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), which stressed that tradition is not simply a matter of the past and hence ultimately opposed to modernity, but an essential part of discourses of modernity, shaped the research of scholars of Christianity in Africa. They started to approach traditional beliefs and practices no longer as a given but as actively produced in particular arenas, by colonial and postcolonial state officials, artists striving for rehabilitation of the African Cultural Heritage and Christian churches or movements. Investigators argued that far from simply alienating African converts from their own culture, missionaries and African evangelists produced reified notions of indigenous culture, which affirmed cultural difference and the imagination of distinct tribal or ethnic identities (Meyer 2002a, Peel 2003, Steegstra 2002, Vail 1989). Conversely, those cultural agents who refer to tradition as a desirable point of reference and basis of cultural pride are often involved in a project of secularizing traditional rituals, thereby turning them into “harmless culture” (Peel 1994, p. 163).

PCCs’ rather merciless attitude toward local cultural traditions and rejection of village culture has caused many researchers to ponder these churches’ stances toward local religious traditions. Certainly those churches fiercely opposing local traditions may be much more indebted to traditional ways of thinking than cultural agents celebrating tradition as cultural heritage (Peel 1994; see also Coe 2000, Hall 1999, Meyer 1999, Steegstra 2004). Although charismatics tend to critique mainline churches for seeking to accommodate local culture through Africanization, they dismiss “Spiritual Churches” for drawing on occult forces, making use of allegedly idolatric elements such as candles and incense, and thus linking up with the “powers of darkness” (Sackey 2001). Tying into popular narratives (often put into circulation by nineteenth-century missionaries and African evangelists) about the devil as the head of all the demons who were once cast out from heaven and settled in Africa, many PCCs devote much room to deliverance from the satanic forces, which possess members and are held to cause material and psychic problems in the sphere of health and wealth. In such semipublic or private meetings, Pentecostal pastors and members of the “prayer force” seek to cast out demons by calling on the Holy Spirit to turn the demonically possessed into born-again Christians (Asamoah-Gyadu 1997, p. 23 and subsequent pages; Laurent 2001b; Meyer 1999, p. 155 and and subsequent pages; for a detailed description from an insider perspective see Onyina 2002, pp. 122–25). Such deliverance sessions happen both in African rural and urban settings (in prayer camps or churches) as well as in PCCs catering to the needs of (often illegal) African immigrants in the diaspora (Van Dijk 1997, 2002). In a sense, they offer a version of African Christianity that
does not make it necessary to (secretly) seek for help outside the confines of the
church. Being born-again is perceived as a radical rupture not only from one’s
personal sinful past, but also from the wider family and village of origin (Engelke
2004; Laurent 2001; Marshall-Fratani 1998; Meyer 1998a, 1999; Van Dijk 1992,
1998). Thus, while at first sight these churches appeared as heavily antitraditional,
closer investigation reveals that this attribute is problematic, as PCCs take seri-
ously spiritual forces to a much larger extent than do mainline churches, which
tend to regard such beliefs as superstitious (albeit on the level of their theologically
trained leaders, not at the grassroots level).

The fact that PCCs affirm a negative, inversed image of traditional gods and
spirits and allow for spirit possession in the context of deliverance pinpoints the ex-
tent to which Christianity and local religious traditions are interrelated. In a sense,
PCCs’ ongoing concern with deliverance shows the very impossibility of their
self-ascribed project to break with what Pentecostals discursively construct as the
“forces of the past.” Claims to the ultimate power of the Holy Spirit notwithstanding,
the despised evil spirits seem to be alive and kicking. Against this backdrop
it has become clear that, despite the need for analysis on the level of believers’
ideas, it would be much too simple for researchers to remain within PCCs’ own
self-descriptions and take at face value the claim that they lead believers away from
their local background. This notion must be analyzed as a conversion narrative,
rather than as an achieved state (Engelke 2004). Pentecostal-charismatic practice
ultimately affirms the impossibility for born-again Christians to escape from forces
grounded in and emanating from the local. In this sense, PCCs, while speaking to
desires to link up with the wider world and escape the constraints of poverty, also
articulate Christianity in relation to local concerns.

Whereas, up until now PCCs have mainly referred to local cultural and religious
traditions through diabolization or demonization, signs indicate a more positive
appreciation of these traditions in charismatic circles. Pentecostal African theolo-
gians recently started to reconcile African religious traditions and Christianity in a
postmodern synthesis (e.g., Onyinah 2002). For example, the charismatic leader of
the International Central Gospel Church [headquartered in Accra, Ghana (Gifford
to develop the notion of African pride (Otabil 1992, see also Larbi 2001). Also
the emergence of new Gospel Music groups that deliberately incorporate tradi-
tional signs and symbols into their lyrics and performance suggests that the rather
negative attitude toward tradition may be changing (M. de Witte, personal commu-
nication). The question is, of course, what to make of this revival of tradition (if it
gets through at all). I would suggest that rather than viewing this apparent revival
as a return to the “authentic,” and thus relapse into the resilient yet false tempo-
ralizing device that locates authenticity and tradition in the past, it may be more
useful to understand it as a new practice of signification in which tradition features
as a cultural style (see also Ferguson 1999, p. 96). In any case, as anthropologists
have successfully deconstructed the modernization perspective, on which the view
of tradition as a matter of the past ultimately depended, it has become difficult,
though all the more challenging, to find an appropriate conceptual space for the authentic or the traditional. This is one of the major tasks researchers will face in the future.

AFRICA AND “THE WIDER WORLD”

Whereas the notion of Africanization, thriving in the interface of anthropology and religious studies, ceased to be the main drive behind anthropological research, globalization and modernity became the buzz words in the 1990s. This new focus opened up new venues for interdisciplinary exchange with sociologists of religion (Lehman 2001, Martin 2002), and opened up possibilities for debates about PCCs across the limits of area studies (Coleman 2002, Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001, Corten & Mary 2001, Poewe 1994). Of course, the question as to how Africans related to the “modern world” already informed earlier studies of AICs. Much research in the 1960s and 1970s was conducted from a perspective of modernization, which saw indigenous culture as ultimately doomed to disappear with ongoing Westernization and secularization. Whether classified as escapist “crisis cults” or as creative Independent movements, AICs were regarded as indicators of the extent to which Africans still found themselves between traditional and modern society. This perspective, with its reference points of “traditional religion” and “new nation-state,” was indebted to “a notion of society as a normally stable arrangement of structures, roles and institutions” that regarded religious enthusiasm as ultimately disturbing, at least conceptually if not politically (Fabian 1981 [1991], p. 114). AICs were held to cope with modernization, be it by offering the capacity to “explain, predict and control” the larger macrocosm into which Africans were drawn by colonialism through conversion to the High God (Horton 1975), or by enabling revitalization through a symbolic experience of “returning to the whole” (Fernandez 1982). Horton’s intellectualist approach is problematic because it regards the individual quest for knowledge as the prime drive behind and explanation for conversion, thereby neglecting the metaphoric richness of religious thought and action, the emotive appeal of the sacred, and the power of more structural political-economic processes. Fernandez’s position, as outlined above, draws too strong a contrast between African images and the forces of colonialism and modernization.

Anthropology’s (re)turn to modernity and globalization in the 1990s is a complex and contested matter, which far exceeds African studies and cannot be addressed here (see Appadurai 1996, Inda & Rosaldo 2002, Kearney 1995). Researchers of PCCs were pushed to rethink modernity in the context of globalization above all because, on the one hand, they were puzzled by these churches’ transnational organizational structure and the outspoken links made between being born-again and going global, and, on the other hand, by the way in which believers’ life worlds were shaped by contradictions between political, social, and economic aspirations and possibilities arising from Africa’s partial participation.
in the global economy. The key challenge was to develop a conceptual framework that would allow for a more sophisticated understanding of the complicated relationship between modern and traditional, or global and local; thus it became urgent to discover how these seeming oppositions, though called on in PCCs’ practice, are actually entangled. It was certainly not a question of returning to the modernization perspective, although researchers, in their eagerness to make sense of PCCs’ self-descriptions, may occasionally find themselves relapse into this old discourse. The main concern was to address modernity not from within the paradigm of modernization, but as a critique thereof. Taking as a point of departure critiques of anthropology’s bounded notions of culture that question a view of the local as a primal category (Appadurai 1996; Fabian 1991, Ch. 10; Gupta & Ferguson 1997) and the realization that cultural specificity, rather than being opposed to globalization, is an essential component of globalization’s dialectics of flow and closure (Clifford 1988, Meyer & Geschiere 1999), many anthropologists ventured into ethnographies of modernity. This endeavor, characterized by a dialectical understanding of the relationship between theory and empirical research, seeks to explore how people’s encounters with colonialism, missions, or the capitalist market economy take a different shape in different localities. Hence one finds the emphasis on multiple modernities situated at different times and places, rather than on one single teleological structure (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993, Geschiere 1997). Given the characteristics of PCCs, the framework of ethnographies of modernity was perceived as appealing. In any case, “modernity” proved to be a powerful point of reference, and is also good to disagree with (Englund & Leach 2000, see below).

Many PCCs present themselves as ultimate embodiments of modernity. Building huge churches to accommodate thousands of believers, making use of elaborate technology to organize mass-scale sermons and appearances on TV and radio, organizing spectacular crusades throughout the country—often parading foreign speakers—so as to convert nominal Christians, Muslims, and supporters of traditional religions, creating possibilities for high-quality Gospel Music, and instigating trend-setting modes of dress all create an image of successful mastery of the modern world (de Witte 2003, personal observation; Droz 2001; Hackett 1998). PCCs owe at least part of their wealth to the fact that they successfully oblige members to pay tithes (10% of their income). To help believers advance, some PCCs offer a small loan to needy members, which should enable them to engage in trade and become financially independent—an aim desirable not only to the person in question but also to the church, as it eventually yields higher donations. Many PCCs represent prosperity as a God-given blessing and resent the mainline churches for legitimizing poverty by referring to Jesus Christ as a poor man (Marshall-Fratani 1998, Maxwell 1998, Meyer 1997). The figure of the charismatic pastor—with such stars as Nicolas Duncan-Williams and Mensah Otabil (Ghana), Nevers Mumba (Zambia), and most important, Benson Idahosa (Nigeria) as paradigmatic figures—dressed in exquisite garments and driving a posh car pinpoints that prosperity and being born-again are held to be two sides of the same coin.
The question of how to relate religious content to social-economic issues and class has been addressed by many researchers, thus linking up with the sociology of Pentecostalism in Latin America developed by Martin (1990, 2002) and Freston (1998). These churches had tremendous appeal especially for young people, who seek to eschew gerontocratic hierarchies and aspire to progress in life (the upwardly mobile), yet think (realistically, perhaps) that this goal can be achieved only through a God-given miracle. Indeed, “Your miracle is on the way” is a popular slogan, to be seen on church advertisements, car stickers, and shops all over Africa, which embodies the power of the still unfulfilled, yet resilient “expectations of modernity,” which are frustrated by daily experiences of disconnectedness and marginalization (Ferguson 1999). However, the Prosperity Gospel also risks becoming subverted by its own appeal, in particular if the promise of wealth on which it thrives fails to materialize among believers (Maxwell 1998, p. 366 and subsequent pages). Numerous scandals show many times over that power and wealth may seduce even the staunchest born-again pastor to go astray (a favorite topic of especially Nigerian video-movies). Smith showed that charismatic Pentecostalism not only tends to reproduce the structures of inequality against which it positions itself (see also Marshall 1998), but also stands “dangerously close to the world of witchcraft,” and, while critiquing the possibly evil, occult sources of wealth, is easily suspected to draw on those (Smith 2001). In Owerri (Nigeria) witchcraft suspicions regarding the wealth of flashy born-again pastors led to public riots, in which the church premises and pastors’ residences were destroyed. More research needs to be conducted to assess the way in which the Prosperity Gospel is at once PCCs’ main attraction and, as the promise in the long run fails to materialize among most ordinary believers, its main weakness.

Despite PCCs’ strive for prosperity, the achievement of wealth is moralized by distinguishing between divine and occult sources of wealth, often by referring to traditional ideas concerning the nexus of wealth and morality (Droz 2001). Because the modern world is represented as thriving on temptation (Marshall-Fratani 1998, Meyer 2002b), PCCs appear to alert believers of being wary not to lose themselves in crude consumptive behavior and to use wisely the money they earn. People should avoid drinking alcohol, leading a loose moral life, and, in the case of men, squandering money with “cheap girls.” They offer elaborate lessons on marriage, which young couples prior to their wedding must attend, and special hours for marriage counseling. Though the issue of gender appears to be pertinent, little research has been conducted in this regard (but see Mate 2002). The ideal is a moral self, not misled by the glitzy world of consumer capitalism nor misguided by the outmoded world of tradition, but instead filled with the Holy Spirit. Although there is likely much overlap between the Protestant modes of conduct that Max Weber found to be typical of early Protestantism, the strong emphasis on becoming prosperous and showing off wealth distinguishes PCCs from early modern Protestantism. Because the devil is supposed to operate not only through blood ties linking people to their extended family, in particular, and local culture, in general, but also at the heart of modernity in the sphere
of consumption, the prospect of prosperity is made to depend on deliverance. Occult forces, embodied by the Spirit of Poverty, may block the accumulation of capital; seductive powers, as embodied by Mami Water, may induce them to squander their money on petty things such as cosmetics, perfumes, and sweets, whereas witchcraft and ancestral spirits may prevent them from prospering in life (Bastian 1997; Meyer 1998a,b; Ukah 2003b; see also Ellis & Ter Haar 1998, p. 183 and subsequent pages.). Linking up with ongoing debates about the “modernity of witchcraft” in African studies (Cziekawy & Geschiere 1998, Geschiere 1997, Moore & Sanders 2001), PCCs’ witchcraft discourses express the contractions of modernity, its malcontents and promises (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993), and the moral panics to which it gives rise (Marshall 1991).

As the (prospective) born-again person is PCCs’ point of departure to change the world, much research has focused on Pentecostal notions of the self, the way in which members are enticed to write new scripts for their lives. In my own work I tried to show that, as deliverance was understood as “cutting blood ties” (thus preventing jealous family members and demanding spirits to intrude a person), the invasion of the Holy Spirit through whom this severing occurred could be understood as a symbolic creation of a modern individual subject (1999). Although many charismatics are suspicious of the extended family and “the witches in the village” is a recurrent trope in many sermons, the extent to which PCCs stimulate the genesis of new forms of communitality, which may act as a surrogate family, should not be neglected (as emphasized by Van Dijk 1997, 2002; see also Englund & Leach 2000, p. 235). As Marshall-Fratani (2001) argues, “it is not so much the individualism of Pentecostal conversion which leads to the creation of modern subjects, but the ways in which its projection on a global scale of images, discourses and ideas about renewal, change and salvation opens up possibilities for local actors to incorporate these into their daily lives” (2001, p. 80; see also Marshall-Fratani & Peclard 2002). Calling on believers as brothers and sisters in Christ, contemporary PCCs incite imaginations of community that surpass the space of the ethnic group or the nation as these imaginations are delocalized. This stance materializes in widely available (cassette and video) sermons, music, and literature that circulate in global Pentecostal networks and entice the constitution of a new public of born-again believers with a strong global outlook (Ellis & Ter Haar 1998). It also plays an important role in the diaspora, where many Africans do not have a staying permit and yet are entitled to be married in the church, thereby surpassing national identity politics (Van Dijk 2002). As Martin (2002) put it, “Charismatic Christianity is the portable identity of people in diaspora” (p. 145). So far, however, anthropologists have done little to develop more adequate research methodologies taking into account the transnational dimension of PCCs. They are still mainly studied at one particular location in Africa. One notable exception is Rijk van Dijk, who has researched Pentecostal networks stretching over Europe and Africa and conducted multi-sited fieldwork in Accra, The Hague, and Botswana (1997, 2002, nd.).

Although the research presented so far in this section may suggest that PCCs’ practices translate smoothly into the notions of modernity and globalization, their
use has also triggered debate. Englund & Leach (2000) have criticized anthropological fieldwork on PCCs for being “organized by the meta-narrative of modernity,” which draws them into a Western perspective that ultimately fails to capture what actually goes on in these churches. In order to avoid misrepresentation, they advocate “to subscribe to a tradition of realist ethnography in which fieldwork as lived experience is indispensable for the production of anthropological knowledge” (p. 229). Presenting the case of Pentecostals in Chinsapo (Malawi), Englund & Leach offer valuable ethnographic material (see also Englund 1996), which indeed cautions not to disregard the particularities of different localities at the expense of sweeping generalizations about PCCs’ attitude toward modernity. Although this is not the place to discuss these authors’ intervention in any detail (but see the comments on their piece in *Current Anthropology*), I would like to briefly address the relationship they propose between ethnography and theory. Their plea resonates quite well with Fernandez’s opposition of African imaginations and imageless Western concepts. The problem with such a view, as I try to point out above, is that it is based on an understanding of “African” or, as Englund & Leach call it, “local” as ontologically prior to and distinct from “the wider world” (see also Gupta 2000), and thus as impossible to capture by imageless theoretical frameworks, be it structural-functionalism, Marxism, or modernity. Given that the main reason for turning to modernity (and globalization), as outlined above, was the quest to better grasp how the supposedly “African” or local relates to foreign or global forces without relying on essentializing reifications, Englund & Leach’s theoretical intervention does not have much to offer.

The need to move beyond this position, which has been haunting African studies—and certainly research on Christianity in Africa—for decades, has been asserted by the French political scientist Jean-François Bayart. In his reflections (2000) on “extraversion,” he seeks to surpass the “sterile distinction between the internal dimension of African societies and their insertion in the international system” (p. 234; see also 1993). Insisting that Africa, in its own way, is a player in the process of globalization (rather than being merely disconnected), he investigates how initially foreign, colonial forces subjected Africans by constituting them as subjects. Building on Foucault’s insights, Bayart argues that subjectivation, in both senses of the term, occurs most successfully through a noncoercive use of power, as, for instance, was the case with missions that played a key role in generating a new type of person characterized by new internalized modes of conduct perceived as irredeemably constitutive of one’s identity. For Bayart, appropriation is the prime strategy of extraversion; but in his opinion it is not a question of “new wine in old skins,” as was the case in the discursive context of Christianity and traditional religion. Instead, the appropriators themselves change in the process of appropriating new matters through external links. Here external and internal are not absolute but dialectical categories that continuously erase each other (and this, in the end, makes it difficult to say what exactly is African about strategies of extraversion, as Bayart still seems to claim). Extraversion, understood in this way, should not however be viewed as innocently creative and positive; rather, as Bayart
shows, through appropriation and other strategies of extraversion, Africans also participate(d) dramatically in their own submission, resulting in political turmoil, war, and despair, and the adoption of alternative strategies such as trickery and brute coercion. Against the backdrop of this complex argumentation, which can only be evoked here, it becomes clear that essentialist differences between Africa and the world or the local and the global are impossible to maintain. Accounting for both structural constraints and creative appropriation, the notion of extraversion also allows scholars to reconcile an emphasis on narrativity and agency (Peel 1995), with attention paid to the “long conversation” initiated by the dynamics of newly emerging power structures (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991).

The usefulness of Bayart’s approach to the study of Christianity in general (see Peel 2003) and PCCs in particular is obvious. Gifford (1998), for example, observes: “[F]or all the talk within African circles of localisation, inculturalisation, Africanisation or indigenisation, external links have become more important than ever” (p. 308). Extraversion being both a practice in place to incorporate external material and spiritual matters and a method of surviving, “Africa’s newest Christianity, while in many ways reinforcing traditional beliefs, also serves [...] as one of Africa’s best remaining ways of opting into the global order” (p. 321). Corten & Marshall-Fratani (2001), Maxwell (2000) and, somewhat surprisingly against the backdrop of his earlier stance, Englund (2003) have drawn similar conclusions. There is a danger, though, of overemphasizing the creative and positive aspects of extraversion, which would bring the notion disturbingly close to earlier approaches toward Africanization in the sense of tradition-oriented wholeness and harmony. In many respects, the study of PCCs has little eye for the possibly disorienting, unsettling, and destructive implications of born-again Christianity, the contradictions on which it thrives and the disappointments it generates (but see Behrend 1999, Marshall-Fratani 2001, Smith 2001). This omission may have to do with the fact that the anthropology of religion as a whole still seems to be very much biased toward an understanding of religion as stabilizing above all, in that it offers modes of orientation and control and a secure place to feel at home.

RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

If the two discursive contexts presented so far struggled, albeit in different ways, with the question of the relationship between Africa and the world, the last—and still less developed—discursive context to be presented here is organized along somewhat different faultlines: the relationship between Christianity and politics, or, in more general terms, religion and the secular. The question of AICs’ political dimension having been a key concern for a long time, debates on the relationship between religion and politics tend to downplay one at the expense of the other (Ranger 1986). Whereas some scholars saw AICs as proto-nationalist organizations, others regarded them as inferior to political activity. Yet, Ranger (1986) noted, “few can study these movements without feeling that even if they were not
unequivocally anticolonial they constituted a form of politics” (p. 6). This feeling that religion and politics were entangled in a more complicated way than would suggest their straightforward distinction and the academic division of labor associated with it (religious studies and political science) continued to inform debates about questions of resistance and domination. In these debates the understanding of resistance, and for that matter politics, was broadened so as to encompass the sphere of everyday life. Comaroff (1985), for instance, presented Tshidi Zionism under apartheid as constructing a “systematic counterculture, a modus operandi explicitly associated with those estranged from the centers of power and communication” (p. 191). Because afflicted people served as metonyms for the whole group, healing and deliverance from evil spirits was not merely individual, but rather involved collective restorative work. That Zionist churches did not stimulate overt collective political action was, Comaroff reasoned, due to a lack of opportunity to protest openly. Therefore, the powerless protested within the domain of everyday practice. Although Zionism could only mediate societal contradictions, but not transcend them, it did not turn Tshidi into docile servants of Apartheid, but instead enabled them to express symbolic resistance against the system. Schoffeleers (1991), building on similar data, argued that this understanding of resistance extended the notion beyond recognition. He presented the Zionist churches, and for that matter healing churches in general, as instilling political quiescence in their members—a position which evoked much disagreement (Gunner 2002, p. 6 and subsequent pages). Research on the relation between the symbolic and the political in AICs stretched “the semantics of the political” (Gunner 2002, p. 7) and developed into more complex reflections on processes of domination and control, in terms of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony (see Comaroff & Comaroff 1991) or Bayart’s notion of extraversion.

In my view, the relation between religion and politics is much more complicated than is highlighted in debates about the kind and extent of AICs’ resistance. Scholars recognized that, power being always “rooted in the fusion of the secular and sacred worlds” (Akyeampong 1996, p. 167), it was impossible to disentangle religion and politics. Yet at the same time they reflected on religion and politics in a modern framework, which stressed that both belonged to separate spheres. In retrospect, one can observe that the master narrative of secularization, which, if implicitly, informed theorizing about AICs’ politics, collided with the pressing realization that secularization made little sense with regard to the empirical context under study. Fields’s (1985) study, mentioned previously, was crucial in highlighting this contradiction by showing that even in the colonial administration, a modern site par excellence, it was impossible to contain Christianity in a private realm. It went disturbingly public.

If research on AICs’ politics has mainly explored symbolic forms of resistance, the new PCCs of the 1990s, often emerging in conjunction with processes of democratization and liberalization, urged researchers to pose new questions about Christianity’s public role (e.g., Gifford 1998, Haynes 1996). Gifford’s (1998) pioneering work on Christianity’s public role in Ghana, Uganda, Zambia, and Cameroon
articulates the paradox at stake: “In the West Christianity, while arguably a key source of modernity, has declined in its public significance as modern society has taken shape. In Africa it may be that Christianity is assuming an increasing significance in the creation of a modern, pluralistic African society” (p. 20). Important factors explaining Christianity’s—not only PCCs’—public role are the precarious role of the African postcolonial state, with its run-down structures of governance and failure to achieve legitimacy, and its loosening grip on “civil society” as a result of IMF’s pressure for “good governance” and “democratization.” PCCs, in particular, owe their appeal to the fact that they easily link up with popular world views, which assert the power of invisible forces to impinge on the visual realm and thus readily match Pentecostalism’s emphasis on evil spirits and deliverance.

The question of how to appreciate PCCs’ politics is a matter of debate. Whereas, for instance, the political scientist Haynes (1996) sees PCCs as catering to the real needs of the people and countering the woes of modernization, Gifford is more reserved. Critiqued by mainline churches for their irrational outlook and political opportunism, PCCs easily “walk the corridors of power” (Gifford 1998, p. 341) and align themselves with the government, as numerous examples given by Gifford show. Conversely, those in power may parade their born-again identity, as was the case for Zambia’s president Chiluba or Benin’s president Kérékou. Nevertheless, here too, it is problematic to generalize, as different charismatic pastors adopt different stances toward politics and the government (as, for example, the case of the Ghanaian Mensah Otabil, who was a fierce critic of the Rawlings government, shows, whereas other charismatics aligned themselves with Rawlings) and PCCs’ members’ attitudes toward politics has hardly been subject to research. Recently, the question of PCCs’ attitude toward democracy has become a new research focus which, for instance, materialized in a program funded by the Pew Foundation “Evangelicals and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America,” with Ranger acting as the head of the African dimension of the program (Ranger 2003). The link between anthropological and political science approaches in research on PCCs and the recontextualization of this research in a global frame is laudable. Yet, an all-too-easy slippage into the discursive frameworks of democracy and civil society—the current catch words of global development circuits—needs to be resisted because these notions are often employed in a Eurocentric and normative way that is not helpful in understanding politics in Africa.

The most important feature of Gifford’s analysis is the suggestion to investigate PCCs’ popularity against the backdrop of the shifting role of the state in Africa. Whereas in the era of one-part dictatorial regimes (aptly analyzed by Mbembe 2001) the state sought to contain Christianity outside the public realm (and often fiercely resented mainline churches’ criticisms leveled against its politics), the situation changed significantly with the onset of democratization and liberalization, when politicians (to be) voted into power depended on the consent of their often largely born-again constituencies. In such a situation, becoming Pentecostal may be a seductive political strategy, although, as Phiri (2003) has shown, declaring Zambia a Christian nation was of no help for the born-again president Chiluba to
stay in power. It is fruitful to proceed along these lines in the future because the rise of particular PCCs and their public role can be understood only in reference to the reconfiguration of the political field in general, and the state in particular (Marshall-Fratani 1998). Capturing the entanglement of religion and politics requires an analysis in which attention to religious content and its political positioning converge, as argued (as well as demonstrated) by Ellis & Ter Haar (1998) in their perceptive analysis of the political implications of religious tracts as part and parcel of power struggles that straddle the boundary between the visible and invisible world as easily as that between religion and politics, or fantasy and reality (though, by calling attention to the religious dimension, they paradoxically reaffirm the understanding of religion as a separate sphere, which they put into question). The important and marked public role of PCCs testifies to the fact that the master narrative of secularization, which claims an intrinsic link between modernization and the decline of the public importance of religion, is inadequate to understand PCCs’ attraction and impact on the political as well as personal level.

What is likely at stake is the way in which charismatic movements impinge on the imagination of communities, once the privileged sphere of the nation-state (Anderson 1991). Although our world is a world of nation-states, current African politics shows the incapacity of postcolonial states to bind the citizens into the vision of the nation. The constant occurrence of wars and terror in Africa—presented as a seemingly natural feature that does not even call for explanation in much press footage—pinpoints that the state seems to reach its limits in the face of both small-scale autochthonous incentives and transnational movements such as political Islam or PCCs. Recently the role of PCCs in the formulation of alternative imaginations of community has become a research topic. In this context, the blurring of distinctions between politics and religion is addressed in relation to the emergence of new modes of communication and debate in the public realm. Many PCCs (as well as Islamist movements) have been found to appropriate keenly new electronic media that have become easily accessible and, in a context of media deregulation, allow for an active part to play in identity politics (Marshall-Fratani 1998, Meyer 2004). In addition to the question of how newly available media technologies impinge on and possibly transform existing practices of mediation between the divine and the human world (Bastian 2001, Hackett 1998; see also Lyons 1990, Lyons & Lyons 1991, de Witte 2003), investigators also pay attention to the political and cultural implications of PCCs’ new public voice. This is a question not only of politics in a more narrow sense, but also of the way in which PCCs contribute to the emergence of a new, more Christian public culture. Interesting in this context is the question of how, as a result of PCCs’ popularity, public culture assumes a strong Pentecostal touch, yet also evokes strong opposition from other camps, such as neo-traditionalists (who increasingly tend to adopt the same media formats as PCCs) and Muslims (Meyer 2004).

In the future, there is a need not only for more comparative work between PCCs in Africa and other continents, but above all for more grounded investigations of the different voices in a particular arena, taking into account Islam, neo-traditional
movements, and charismatic Christianity. An important issue concerns the way in which religions play into current identity politics, as they thrive in the limits of the state, by adopting new media practices that enable them to assume a public voice. Of particular interest is the question of how far, despite mutual disagreement and animosities, different religions actually tend to adopt similar formats of public articulation and religious mediation [as the striking similarities between the charismatic Muslim leader Haidara in Mali (Schulz 2003) and Mensah Otabil (de Witte 2003, Gifford 2003) suggest].

Ultimately, the need for anthropologists to pay attention to the shifting role and place of religion in Africa, which motivates much current research, also calls for a critical investigation of the notion of religion itself. As Asad (1993) argues, an understanding of religion in terms of “inner belief” is historically situated in Western Christianity and can thus not be applied simply to different religious traditions that may, for example, place much more emphasis on ritual and materiality (the often-reported misunderstandings between missionaries and Africans about the material outcome of conversion are telling in this regard). Much research on PCCs, however, refers to the religious dimension in terms of a deeply seated inner belief that constitutes the, in a sense, ungraspable power of religion, thereby reaffirming a definition of religion as a separate sphere (e.g., Ellis & Ter Haar 1998, Englund 2003, Hackett 1986). Although it is important to pay attention to PCCs’ power to evoke deeply felt emotions and to mediate experiences of the supernatural, a universal definition of religion must be resisted. As Martin (2002) argues, for instance, certain features such as the strong notions of the “mobile self” and the “portability of charismatic identity” raise the question of whether Pentecostalism represents “postmodern religion” par excellence.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main aim of this review has been to show how the shift from AICs, as prime focus of study, to PCCs in the 1990s impinged on three discursive frames that shaped, yet were transformed by, the study of Christianity in Africa. Echoing a more general trend in anthropology (and cultural studies), also in the field surveyed here, researchers’ relative certainties about the classifications and categories in use—as well as their usefulness—gave way to, albeit contested, processes of de-essentializing such notions as African, authentic, or local, detemporalizing tradition, deconstructing modernization, multiplying modernity, blurring the boundary between religion and politics, and even deuniversalizing religion. Of course, as I have tried to argue, these deconstructions happened for good reasons as, in a sense, the object of study itself seemed to demand these conceptual “liquidations” to be understood as part and parcel of a wider world. And yet, paradoxically, researchers’ growing uneasiness about fixed categories and qualifications does not seem to be paralleled in the world they study. The openings facilitated by the acceleration of flows of people, goods, and ideas, the intensification of global links across
national borders, and the compression of time and space seem to call into being new boundaries. Attempts to de-exoticize Africa and grasp its entanglement with “the wider world” notwithstanding, it is equally clear that many Africans experience being marginalized and “forgotten.” The mass appeal of PCCs can be explained, at least in part, against this backdrop. Adopting a strategy of extraversion, which deliberately develops external links and promises connection with the world, PCCs nevertheless have to address a politics of identity and belonging, in which fixed markers govern processes of in- and exclusion, both in Africa and the diaspora. The challenge for the future is not only to understand what charismatic religion can and, equally importantly, cannot do in such configurations, but also to grasp the power of identity without naturalizing it, to deconstruct reifications without neglecting their power. The call for solid ethnography is as pertinent as ever.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to John Peel and my colleagues at the Research Centre Religion and Society and the Department of Anthropology (University of Amsterdam): Gerd Baumann, Peter Geschiere, Mattijs van de Port, Peter van Roojen, and Jojada Verrips for their perceptive, stimulating, and constructive comments on earlier versions of this review.

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