

# Religion and Democratization in Africa

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Two main issues form the focus of attention in this study. The first is the relationship of senior religious figures to the state in Africa and the role of the former in the region's democratization in the 1990s. The second is the political importance of 'popular' religions in Africa. The overall aim is to examine the relationship of religion and politics in Africa in the context of democratization, to: (1) establish the nature of the links between senior religious figures and state elites in Africa, (2) make some preliminary observations about the political nature of popular religions in the region, and (3) comment on the overall impact of religious actors on Africa's democratization.

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Key words: democratization; Africa; Christianity; Islam

## Introduction

Africa<sup>1</sup> in the 1980s and 1990s experienced something it had not seen for decades: widespread popular calls for democratization, part of a wider package of demands for more and better economic and human rights. There followed regime change in a number of African countries, including Benin, Cape Verde, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Niger, São Tomé, Sierra Leone and Zambia. Elsewhere, however, authoritarian rulers demonstrated ability, at least temporarily, to stay put either by winning elections (Ghana, Burkina Faso) or by simply refusing to budge (Togo, Kenya, Zaire).

Demands for democratization had both domestic and external roots. Domestically, demands for reform reflected an awakening – or reawakening – of an often long-dormant political voice for various civil society groups, with trade-union officials, higher-education students, businesspeople, civil servants and religious – mostly Christian – figures initially leading and coordinating popular demands for reform.<sup>2</sup> Professional politicians later made such demands integral parts of their programmes for election. The widespread expectation was that popular efforts would force long-entrenched, often venal governments from office. Democratically elected regimes would take power, with new leaders tackling with energy, resourcefulness and

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imagination pressing political, social and economic problems. Previously ignored political constituencies would be heard, human rights would be observed, including the precious freedom to criticize governments without fear of incarceration. A second factor was that Africa's democratization was the 'road map' for political change preferred by key external actors: western governments who provided Africa with the bulk of its foreign aid. In sum, recent demands for democratization in Africa are best explained through the interaction of domestic and international factors, with the former of most importance.

Religious figures, notably Christian leaders, added their voices to the clamour for change in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Leading Catholics were frequently involved in national conferences on the political way forward in a number of French-speaking countries, including Congo-Brazzaville, Togo, Mali, Niger, Gabon, Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) and Chad. The outcome in Congo-Brazzaville was the democratic election of a new government, although the political situation remained tense. In Togo, Chad, Gabon and Zaire, on the other hand, such conferences did not lead, in the short term, either to new constitutions or democratically elected governments. In Zaire and Togo, led respectively by Presidents Mobutu and Eyadema, the outcome was stalemate, as opposition forces were too weak to unseat them.<sup>3</sup> In Chad, a Christian-Muslim polarization meant that the political situation remained volatile. In Gabon, Omar Bongo retained power for a while, despite the registration of 13 political parties and a powerful, although unsuccessful challenge, from an opposition leader, Paul Mba-Abesole (a Catholic priest) and his movement, *Le Rassemblement de Boucherons* (National Society of Woodcutters). In mostly Muslim Niger and Mali, however, new political leaders and democratically elected governments emerged. In sum, involvement of Catholic leaders in national democracy conferences reflected the fact that the Catholic Church was often one of only a few national institutions that had managed to keep a degree of corporate independence from the state.

The aim of this account is to examine the relationship of religion and politics in Africa in the context of democratization. Two main issues form its focus. The first is the relationship of senior religious figures to the state in Africa and the role of the former in the region's recent attempts to democratize. The second is to examine the political importance of 'popular' religions – that is, religions not legitimized by a close relationship between their leaders and those of the state, but instead with bottom up structures rooted in grass-roots concerns. The first task is to establish the nature of the links between senior religious figures and state elites in Africa. The second is to make some preliminary observations about the political nature of popular religions in Africa and their varying relationships to democracy.

### **State and Religion in Comparative Perspective in Africa**

In Africa as elsewhere, leaders of religious bodies – whether Christian or Muslim – are social products of the societies from which they come. As individuals, they may be theoretically and intellectually convinced of the benefits of democracy, understanding that concept in both structural (appropriate political institutions, including independent legislature and judiciary) and normative ('real', pluralistic, competition, worthwhile civic freedoms) terms. Yet they also have to go about their daily business in an environment characterized by state heavy handedness, the threat or expectation of military involvement in politics, shortages of economic resources, venality, corruption, and suspicion or worse between ethnic and/or religious groups. As a result, it seems plausible to surmise that their personal opinions regarding the theoretical desirability of democracy are often, and often necessarily, at least partially moulded by a pursuit of individualistic material concerns. In short, I am suggesting that many religious leaders in Africa will have both individual, as well as institutional, economic interests and concerns in terms, for example, of improving their church's 'market share', perhaps by seeking restrictions on their chief rivals.

Since Africa's independence from colonial rule, church and state developed mutually supportive relationships in many regional countries. The role of Christian churches *vis-à-vis* government in Africa, as elsewhere, is in theory a simple, and clear one, well expressed in the following:

the limits of the state's sphere of action are set by the definition of 'temporal', that is, those activities of civilization that arise in the 'earthly' city . . . The church in no way limits the state's rights church and state complement one another, each by working in its proper realm.<sup>4</sup>

However, churches often found themselves on the horns of a dilemma: to what extent should they dare to criticize their increasingly authoritarian governments – even when they clearly abused power in ways that Christian morality would find unacceptable? Two distinct, mutually exclusive, options presented themselves: (1) to speak out and expect to be criticized by rulers for doing so, or (2) publicly keep quiet – but seek to change government policy by persuasion behind the scenes.

However, there was also a third option. As the extremely cordial relations between Catholic church leaders and the Mobutu regime in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) illustrates, it was in both the interests of both Church and state for there to be social and political stability, even if it required authoritarian rule to achieve it. The cordial relationship is well illustrated in a 1965 declaration from the then Archbishop of Kinshasa, Joseph Malula. Addressing President Mobutu personally, he stated that 'the Church recognizes your authority, because authority comes from God. We will loyally apply

the laws you establish. You can count on us in your work of restoring the peace toward which all so ardently aspire'.<sup>5</sup> True to Malula's word, until the early 1990s, the Catholic hierarchy in Zaire was consistently unwilling to engage the regime in direct public confrontation. It was only after an unprecedented show of public displeasure – significantly involving young priests and nuns – that the Catholic hierarchy was galvanized publicly to oppose Mobutu's authoritarian rule.

It is claimed that senior Catholic figures were bought off by material inducements, quite apart from the fact that the institutional role of the Church was believed to be supportive of almost *any* temporal regime, including Mobutu's authoritarian rule. As the quotation from Malula indicates, God was believed to confer absolute authority on ruling governments. Understandably, Malula was anxious to continue the good working relationship with the state, to build on the mutually supportive arrangement which had typified the colonial period. Then, according to Schatzberg, 'occasional differences [between Catholic and colonial authorities were] minimal in comparison to the numerous issues on which church and state worked in concert'.<sup>6</sup>

More generally, for church leaders in Africa, silence in the face of poor and/or corrupt government following independence reflected a number of concerns: they themselves may have benefited materially from the status quo; many were inherently conservative and believed that governments, however bad, were exercising authority ordained by God, and, finally, such leaders often recognized that their church's corporate position in a country was in part dependent upon state acquiescence or support. In Zaire, as Boyle illustrates, the value of cooperation with civil authorities for church leaders 'leads (them) to employ... indirect modes of communication and influence in their relationship with society and the political regime'.<sup>7</sup> This is the idea of the 'two realms' of church and state, where the former may attempt to influence the latter by persuasion but has no other means at its disposal if it wishes to retain its privileged position. In other words, normally the church hierarchy can be no more than an interlocutor between state and society. As the trajectory of Mobutu's rule only too clearly showed, those who gain a reputation for outspoken criticism were very likely to find themselves incarcerated – or worse.<sup>8</sup> Such a position may also have been related to the fact that senior Christian figures were well treated personally by Mobutu. For example, 'Cardinal Malula lived in a mansion that the President gave him [in 1974]... in 1978 or so the President gave a Mercedes to every bishop, Protestant or Catholic'. The result was that Catholicism, in partnership with the powerful, independent Kimbanguist church, 'assumed some of the functions of an ideology in the service of the dominant class'.<sup>9</sup>

A further factor – apart from concerns with stability and the fears of repercussions of openly challenging regimes – is that some Christian leaders were

personally closely associated with ruling regimes, sometimes to the extent of holding political appointments. For example, in Lesotho in the early 1970s, 'the post-independence government of Chief Leabua Jonathan and the National Party was predominantly Catholic in support and conservative in policy', enjoying the support of South Africa's apartheid regime.<sup>10</sup>

The position was similar in Togo. There, the ruling party, *Le Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais* (RPT), had a hegemonic position analogous to that of the dominant parties in Zaire and Lesotho. The Catholic church – with about a third of Togo's people – dominated spiritually. Together, Catholic and secular elites in the RPT dominated politically and spiritually, maintaining a strong grip on society.<sup>11</sup> A further example comes from Rwanda where, until 1985, the Catholic archbishop of Kigali was on the central committee of the single party, the *Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement*. In addition, Bishop Matala's membership of the commission for instituting a one-party state in the 1970s in Zambia was also a clear manifestation of a close relationship between state and church.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to suggest that all senior Christian figures enjoy cosy relationships with ruling regimes. For example, the Catholic Archbishop of Monrovia, Michael Francis, is a strong and outspoken advocate of human rights and social justice in Liberia. Since the mid-1970s, he has consistently critiqued Liberia's socio-political and moral situation, underlining what he sees as three forms of corruption: 'social corruption' ('unjust imprisonment, detention without charge or trial, inhuman and degrading prison conditions'), 'professional corruption' (when government personnel abuse their positions to make money or 'employ individuals because they are of the same family, or tribe or are girlfriends'), and 'personal corruption' ('the all-pervasive sexual immorality of the country'). Over time, a number of Catholic priests in Liberia followed Francis's critical lead. But while he personally escaped governmental reprisals, other, more junior figures, were less fortunate, with many suffering harassment by the state's security services.<sup>13</sup>

Given the mutually supportive relationships between many senior church figures and states, how can we account for involvement of Christian leaders in Africa's recent democratization? Some analysts regard the leaders of the mainline (as distinct from the independent) churches as highly significant actors in this context. Leading Christians are said to have practically dragged unwilling, undemocratic governments towards the dreaded ballot box. Such figures are said to have led pro-democracy agitation not only because they were democrats personally (as a result of their Christianity), but also because their 'flocks' had collectively experienced diminishing benefits from non-democratic rule: poor government, bad economic policies, and unworkable ideological programmes.<sup>14</sup> In short, Africa's democratization is perceived to be a result of: (1) Christian leaders' tenacity, clear-sightedness,

and lack of fear of the consequences of their actions, and (2) such figures' burning sense of outrage on behalf of their followers.

Proponents of the 'Christians as necessarily democrats' argument also point to interaction of international and domestic factors to explain how Christian leaders have been prominent in pro-democracy campaigns in several parts of the world. For example, Diamond notes how: 'religious institutions, especially the Catholic Church, have been prominent in the movements of a great many countries – notably, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Philippines, South Korea, Poland, Haiti, South Africa, and most recently Kenya – to oppose, denounce, frustrate and remove authoritarian regimes'.<sup>15</sup>

For Peel, Christian institutional independence and integrity in relation to state power is an essential facet of the post-colonial African structure of power relations.<sup>16</sup> Because, in the main, most expressions of the world religions tended to be identified with the main interest groups, whether ethnic or class, they were available in a diffuse form as a mediating element, relatively neutral ground, in social and political conflict. Religious institutions were therefore generally accorded respect by the political elite. Peel's argument locates both Christian and Muslim religious institutions as interlocutors between state and society, respected bodies whose leaders' own personal desires and preferences are subsumed in their concern to disinterestedly mediate between citizens and government.

In reality such institutions are usually class actors in partnership with the ruling regime. As a result, it is aberrant for official religious institutions to confront the state other than in rather formulaic fashion. Democratic initiatives may be little more than successful strategies of Gramscian-style 'passive revolution'. Leaders of mainline religions (both Christian or Muslim) often enjoy close relationships with state figures, and are often staunchly supportive of the status quo. This is because, as we have noted in the context of Christian religious leaders, such people may be bound to the state in a mutual project to maintain hegemonic domination over society. Islam illustrates this point.

It is often suggested that Muslims are less impressed by the claims of liberal democracy than Christians.<sup>17</sup> (However, two of seven African countries holding national democratization conferences in the early 1990s, Mali and Niger, were both strongly Muslim countries.) Islam is often regarded – especially by some Western analysts<sup>18</sup> – as an authoritarian, even totalitarian, religion. Islamists, in particular, are seen to try to impose their 'fundamentalist' visions on society as a putative means of purifying society via the imposition of Sharia law.

Three issues contextualize a discussion of the role of Islam in Africa. The first is that there are a number of versions of Islam extant in the region. Many Africans belong to Sufi brotherhoods; in addition, many ethnic groups, especially in West and East Africa, converted historically to Islam en

masse; some of them will also be members of Sufi brotherhoods so the latter may also have an ethnic dimension. Orthodox conceptions of Islam – nearly always Sunni in Africa – are the province of the religious elite, the *ulama*, religio-legal scholars. Thus, ‘Islam’ in Africa is in fact a multifaceted term covering various Muslim interpretations of the faith.

Overall, Islamic Africa can be divided into three distinct categories, corresponding to extant social, cultural and historical divisions. On the one hand, there is the dominant socio-political and cultural position of Islam found in the emirates of northern Nigeria, the lamidates of northern Cameroun and the sheikdoms of northern Chad. Not only are religious and political power typically fused in the hands of a few individuals but there is also a parallel class structure.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, there are the areas where Sufi brotherhoods predominate – generally in West and East Africa, and especially in Senegal, the Gambia, Niger, Mali, Guinea, Kenya and Tanzania. Moreover, in a number of African states, Muslims, fragmented by ethnic and regional concerns, are politically marginalized as a minority bloc. This is the situation in, *inter alia*, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Côte d’Ivoire.

The second factor is that ‘fundamentalist’ Islam is rare, though not unknown, in Africa below the Sahara. This is because Sufi Islam, the faith of many African Muslims, is often a target for fundamentalists – found both within the *ulama* and their secular allies – because it is regarded as a primitive or degraded form of Islam which must be reformed or ‘purified’. Such ‘fundamentalist’ interpretations of Islam are of political importance in Sudan (where it is the ruling ideology and key issue fuelling the three decades-long civil war) and in parts of northern Nigeria, where inter-religious conflict – leading to hundreds of deaths of Muslims and Christians since the early 2000s – are important political issues.

Third, there is ambivalence in the way that many Muslims regard the concept of liberal democracy itself. Many Muslims are said to oppose Western interpretations of democracy, where sovereignty is said to reside with the people, because it is seen as a secularized system negating God’s own sovereignty. Members of the *ulama* will usually be strong supporters of the status quo. This is not least because it allows them to be integrally involved in the running of the affairs of Muslims in their state via control of national Muslim organizations. Thus a partnership with state-level politicians is crucial.

### **Religious Leaders and the State in Africa**

Political leaders will seek to achieve or maintain domination over society by developing an ideology of their own legitimacy, justifying the status quo, through a pursuit of an often putative ‘national unity’. Bolstering and underlying ‘national unity’ concerns is a hegemonic thrust, ‘which drives the state

and the self-proclaimed dominant social groups to seek to control and to shape civil society'.<sup>20</sup> Class concerns in Africa (best understood in a Weberian rather than an analytically less useful Marxist sense) coalesce, dominate and override all other issues, except sometimes ethnic or religious divisions. Political officials may well also be merchants and businessmen: how else to make a profit in a context of very low remuneration for employment? Because religious actors suffer from the same economic problems, many attempt to use their network of contacts to advance their own self-interest.<sup>21</sup> This gives them an important political role in the same way that businesspeople strive to develop contacts with political elites for mutual benefit.

Those who make it to the top of ecclesiastical structures are selectively recruited according to educational attainments and perhaps ethnic affinity, gradually socialized into the world of the political and social elites, and rewarded materially for their loyalty to the struggle to maintain the political status quo. What develops is a kind of hegemonic coalition with secular political leaders. The central goal is the maintenance of order and the continuation of elite control. Only occasionally do circumstances combine in such a way that religious leaders find themselves propelled to the forefront of popular opposition to state power. The issue here is the relationship of the sacred to the temporal. In the Christian conception the two realms of God and Caesar provide a theoretically clear-cut division of labour: religion is concerned with the spiritual aspects of life, politics with material concerns. Thus, for Christian leaders there is no necessity to propound on clearly political issues – provided the latter do not have a serious impact upon the ability of the former to practise and propound their religion. That is, provided that religious worship is tolerated by the state, democracy per se may not be that relevant to an expression of a belief in God or in the ability of the followers of a religion to worship. Many religious professionals no doubt believe that during their daily work they are performing God's mission to the best of their ability. They will be as certain as possible that their vocation is morally right, essential for the spiritual health of their countrymen and women. There may be occasional doubts of a 'technical' character, that is, they 'may doubt whether a particular action in operation or contemplation most expediently advances (their) larger life purposes, about which (they) can never be in any doubt'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, religious leaders' long-term goals are clear, short-term expediency while regrettable is not of profound importance in relation to the overriding objective of achieving God's kingdom on earth. The implication is that God ultimately ordains all political and social authority on earth.

The separation of church and state in western Europe created a pattern of behaviour in which Christianity's division from secular power became increasingly central to sovereignty issues. The sacred-temporal division was bolstered by the rise of secular nation states in the nineteenth century

in Europe.<sup>23</sup> During colonialism, western-European notions of statehood and sovereignty were transplanted to Africa. Among them were those ideas relating to Christianity's role in relation to the state, even though they derived from western Europe's particular socio-cultural background and history.

The Roman Catholic Church provides the best example of a religious organization whose mundane institutional structure has been created to most expeditiously allow God's representative – the Pope – to rule in a singular fashion. The role of the Catholic Church in Africa is of some importance both because of the large numbers of Africans who are baptized Catholics – around 120 million people, or one-fifth of Africa's population – and because the Church is the only religious institution which is a self-financing transnational organization. Historically, however, the Church has often been regarded as 'conservative, corporatist, and hostile to liberal democracy'.<sup>24</sup>

It is usually only when rulers appear to be governing in a manner seemingly at odds with God's law that Christian – including Catholic – hierarchies see fit to make their disquiet public.<sup>25</sup> For example, in Zaire, a memorandum from the Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops to President Mobutu in March 1990 criticized the political system from the point of view of its structure which, it claimed, was against reason and natural law. Zaire, the bishops argued, had a 'hybrid' political system that juxtaposed a 'liberalism', offering significant rewards to a small minority, with a regime philosophy of 'totalitarianism', which sought to gather all power to itself. Significantly, the memorandum suggested ways to reform the existing system rather than suggest the creation of a new one according to different philosophical principles. Mobutu himself was regarded as a misled national saviour, rather than as the main impediment to national progress.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the thrust of the bishops' memorandum was reformist in aim, rather than radical or revolutionary. Yet, despite the emollient tone and reasonable language employed, of the claimed 6,128 memoranda received by the government on the issue of the political way forward for Zaire, it refused to consider the bishops' memorandum. This was because Mobutu feared endorsing the right of religious leaders to offer political advice.<sup>27</sup>

It follows from this that Catholic (and, by extension, other mainline) religious leaders will sometimes openly criticize temporal rulers if they appear to be departing too radically from the path of reason and law. It does not imply that they will have an alternative programme to offer, but rather that once public opinion on an issue appears to be moving steadily in a certain direction, then Christian leaders might well add their weight to it. This also implies that Christian leaders may acquiesce in regime policies for as long as there is insufficient public opinion against them, especially when the claimed justification for authoritarian rule is national unity. Furthermore, religious leaders may well personally be beneficiaries of a close relationship with the state. Under

these circumstances there is normally little temptation to protest too long or too loud unless supported by public opinion.

Post-colonial norms of state–church interaction in Africa are still to some degree contextualized by the imperial past, although the extent of this influence will differ from place to place. Because the mission churches were so closely linked to their post-colonial African successors in the minds of some contemporary rulers Christian fundamentalist churches, often regarded as a dangerous American imports by insecure regimes, are perceived with such suspicion. The response of some African governments, suspicious of the motivations and aims of Christian churches, has been to seek to control their numbers. For example, in Zaire, only three churches were allowed officially to operate until the early 1990s, not only in line with the state policy of ‘*authenticité*’, but also to control them and keep their leaders in thrall to Mobutu.<sup>28</sup>

In Kenya, on the other hand, the government of Jomo Kenyatta (1963–1978) used a different tactic: it sought to diminish the social importance of the Anglican church by encouraging the numbers of independent African churches to proliferate so that the Anglican voice would be but one among many. Further to encourage independent church leaders’ support, state jobs, including Cabinet positions, were on offer.<sup>29</sup> The uncharacteristic willingness of the Anglican church in Kenya to tangle with the government is explained by the fact that during colonial times the overwhelmingly European congregation at Nairobi’s Anglican cathedral was described as ‘the colonial power at prayer’.<sup>30</sup> After independence the tradition of ‘voice’ rather than silence remained, at least for a while. Later, in Kenya, as in Uganda during the rule of Idi Amin Dada in Uganda in the 1970s, ‘churches found themselves dragged against their will, into becoming foci of opposition’.<sup>31</sup>

Christian churches in Africa have often been unwilling to pronounce on thorny political issues, although the situation in South Africa is different. During the apartheid era (1948–1994), the white-dominated state looked to a main religious ally, the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), for religious justification for its policy of ‘separate development’. Over time, however, things began to change – in response to both internal and external developments – with other non-Afrikaner churches feeling increasingly emboldened to challenge apartheid on both religious and moral grounds. By the mid-1980s, the South African Council of Churches had come under black leadership, the ecumenical vanguard for radical ‘Black theology’. Its best-known – and probably most influential expression – was the ‘Kairos document’.<sup>32</sup> The importance of Christian opposition to white minority rule was clear by the end of the 1980s: premises of leading church organizations were fire-bombed by right-wing groups.<sup>33</sup> In short, with the exception of the NGK, Christian anti-apartheid institutional opposition – especially from the Roman Catholic, Anglican

and Evangelical Lutheran churches – was influential in pressuring the de Klerk government to democratize.<sup>34</sup>

I have argued in this section that it is relatively unusual – although by no means impossible, as the example of South Africa indicates – for mainline Christian churches to express political opposition to authoritarian regimes in Africa, for a number of reasons. Apart from the idea that secular rulers may be believed to be divinely sanctioned and thus beyond mundane attack, there are also other considerations. There may be the belief that former Christian mission churches still to some extent compromised by the colonial past. In addition, religious agents may be uncomfortably vulnerable to the state's power of control. The result of these factors may well be that cooperation with authoritarian states may well seem the best policy for religious organizations to adopt and maintain.

### **Hegemony and Power in Africa**

It is sometimes suggested that a Gramscian notion of hegemony is highly relevant to conceptions of power in Africa.<sup>35</sup> This involves the creation and institutionalization of a pattern of group activity in a state with a concomitant espousal of an idealized framework that strives to present itself as 'common sense'. The concept of hegemony also helps to explain how various characteristics – such as, culture, social formation and political institutions, involving individuals and corporate bodies – fit together into an overall concept of power. It also enables us to locate within a useful analytical framework, the interrelationships between state and civil society, the elite–counter-elite dichotomy, and the division between those with and those without adequate resources to prosper.

Central to an analysis of a Gramscian conception of hegemony is the nature of power itself. In the African context, it may be insufficient to see power conventionally: the ability of one group or individual to gain the acquiescence or, at least, quiescence, of another because of the fear of the consequences of non-compliance. Power may be better thought of as a two-faceted, sometimes contradictory force. In Cox's expression 'power is a centaur, part man, part beast, a combination of force and consent'.<sup>36</sup> This is the crux of Gramsci's concept of hegemony: the iron fist fills the velvet glove; the former is uncovered only when deemed necessary. There is an exemplary enforcement potential, force underlies the power structure; the strong can (and will) crush the weak when necessary; and the latter know this. Yet, the use of force to gain compliance will be the last, or at least not the first, option. Indeed, force wielded by the dominant against the subordinate will not be necessary (or only very rarely) if that domination is seen as legitimate, even necessary. In other words, force will not be resorted to as long as subordinate people

perceive elite domination as right and proper, or at least tolerable. Subordinates will be more inclined to view their position with relative equanimity as long as the dominant elites seek to rule by at least a modicum of consent, rather than by absolutist or dictatorial means. Ruling elites must, therefore, be concerned with the form as much as the content of its rule. Might alone cannot routinely be effective; it must be tempered with a practical concern to keep social relations relatively trouble free, a concern to rule by law as far as possible must be evident. Above all, rulers must express leadership by allusion to general, rather than specific, interests, such as 'national unity' or 'national self-determination'. Often – historically, in western European contexts – the development of (more or less) popular institutions is seen as the key for the success of a hegemonic strategy. This is because institutions help to coalesce diverse interests within a single body, giving rise to consensus and to a universalization of policy over time. Many ordinary people perceive that power relations are as they should be when the state achieves its objectives without dissent. That is, it is only 'right' that politicians and state officials rule authoritatively, that is their role.

Those involved in the quest for hegemony seek to create what Williams calls a 'unified moral order', where 'a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society'.<sup>37</sup> In much of Africa, the 'moral order' is one where, notwithstanding increasingly ineffective appeals to 'national unity', individuals do their utmost to advance personal interests, as well as those of family and other favoured groups.

In order to locate the notion of hegemony in a form conducive to analysis, it is necessary to explain what the state amounts to in Africa. The state is best understood as the sum of two theoretically separate, yet in practice interlinked, developments. First, it is a rapacious *structure* of interlinked interests (often involving creation and perpetuation of clientelistic relationships), where 'public institutions (are) colonized and emasculated'.<sup>38</sup> Second, it is a hegemonic *process* whereby elites continually pursue power. Forrest suggests that 'state rulers are defined by and obtain their power and resources on the basis of their officeholding'.<sup>39</sup> The same form of structure-process can be applied to orthodox religious institutions. Leading figures within them will join together in a theocratic 'class' which seeks to advance their personal, as well their institution's, position in relation to competitors. The crux of the matter for temporal as for religious leaders is that public office brings private profit, creating in the process a class structure which develops on the basis of a social differentiation rooted in the practicalities of wealth accumulation, rather than in relation to the productive process (See examples earlier relating to Zaire, Togo, Rwanda and Lesotho). As a result, hegemonic striving unites individuals and groups, including some religious actors, within power structures at the national level. Certainly, some of the accrued wealth

trickles down to those outside the state parameters, assured by the conglomeration of clientelistic, familial and kin relationships. Thus, the 'state' is not merely the sum of its official institutional parts, and it does not seem clear that democratization has altered things significantly in this regard. Instead, there is a partial interpenetration of the African state and society, with clientelist ties often cementing the system.

Religious institutions and figures are by no means exempt. To see why this should be the case, we need to understand how many ordinary Africans believe that the success of a religion is reflected in the wealth and status of leaders: how else would it be clear that God smiles on them? This was part of the reason why, during the colonial era, many Africans converted either to Christianity or to Islam. To many the idea of a supreme God was already culturally acceptable, as the weakness of the old gods was demonstrated conclusively by their inability to see off the new one.<sup>40</sup> Various – educational and welfare – benefits might well accrue to the converts who 'signed up' for the alien religion, sundering ties with the old one.

It is often noted how politics in Africa is characterized by the importance of patrimonial and clientelist relationships.<sup>41</sup> 'The big man, small boy syndrome' dominates political, social and economic individual relationships. Many who have an official capacity to exploit will do so as a means of personal benefit. This intermingling of public and private concerns is by no means unusual to or, of course, only found in African contexts. The patrimonial notion of power and the position of the individual in relation to the community coalesce in an understanding that power, whether spiritual, political or economic, may bring profit. Consequently, individuals may seek to develop mutually beneficial relationships with both subordinates and superiors. In political competition, cultivation of networks of reciprocity is a *sine qua non* for aspirant politicians, as well as for incumbent power holder. Those who fail to maintain networks of relationships will likely to fall prey to shifts of politics, and find themselves ousted from the positions which gave them power in the first place. Because religious institutions have to survive in an environment of resource shortages, their structural characteristics and the types of interaction between individuals may well parallel or replicate those in the secular realm. In addition, as already discussed, there may be interaction between religious and secular elites for mutual benefits.

Much of this is relevant for both Christian and Muslim religious contexts, including Islamic sub-systemic patrimonial systems that thrive in certain areas. In the northern Nigerian emirates, the northern Camerounian lamidates, and in the tribal sheikdoms of northern Chad, socio-religious culture melds both Islam and Arabic systems of patrimonial domination, in ways that resemble social structures found in parts of North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> In Senegal there is a different arrangement, where Sufi *marabouts*

often have important political and economic positions, first developed under French colonial rule. The leader of the most important brotherhood, the Muridiyya, does not hold an official state post, yet is regarded as especially politically powerful. This is because he holds power over his disciples, primarily found among the economically significant Wolof, who grow most of the country's major export crop, groundnuts.<sup>43</sup>

Senegal's high proportion of Muslims (around 90 per cent of the total population) is unusual in Africa. More often, there is a high degree of regional religious heterogeneity. Thinkers since Aristotle have taken it for granted that religious homogeneity is a prerequisite, a condition for political stability. Certainly, in Africa the relationship between state and religious leaders is often be complicated by the fact there are many religious organizations. If one set of religious figures can (or, at least, promise to) provide their followers' compliance to the rule of the current regime – as Muridiyya *marabouts* long managed to do in Senegal – then it will be of great importance for the state to reach a deal with them. Yet, the situation does not have to be characterized by the favouring of but one religion over others. Governments may well establish a working relationship with the most important religions (typically, Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, the leading Protestant church and perhaps an independent Christian church), and thereby create a degree of hegemony founded on limited religious diversity and maximal elite cooperation. In this kind of arrangement there is no necessity for overt religious competition that might undermine the collectively advantageous arrangement.

Being a *de facto* member of the state framework often gives senior religious leaders opportunity to amass personal wealth, in just the same way as other leaders of important societal groups, such as senior trade union officials, leaders of professional bodies, top civil servants, and ethnic leaders. There are no doubt some senior religious figures who wholeheartedly devote themselves to the spiritual health and welfare of their followers without developing additional sources of remuneration; nevertheless many others do.

Networks of reciprocity involve religious organizations in Africa in three ways. First, as already suggested, religious leaders will normally, but not invariably, co-operate with state power for both material and spiritual advantages. Threats may be issued; rewards may be offered and received. The aim either way is to ensure compliance with state objectives of control. Second, churches have been greatly influenced by what Gifford refers to as the 'Big Man model'.<sup>44</sup> Just as in secular contexts, senior and middle-ranking religious figures, while no doubt personally convinced of the spiritual efficacy of the religion which they embrace, may in addition understand their job primarily as a means to enhanced well being. Family members and ethnic allies may be rewarded with jobs. Profits can accrue to religious big men from their

worldly business interests. In Togo, for example, some Catholic prelates are referred to as ‘autoritaro-prébendier’ (authoritarian-prebendalist).<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the position of more lowly priests may be on the decline. There is a serious decline in applications to African Roman Catholic seminaries related to the perception that the priesthood’s social and economic position is seriously diminished compared to the past.<sup>46</sup>

Third, leaders of African religious organizations can profit from relationships with foreign, especially western, non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Western NGOs, often mindful of state corruption, with financial resources disappearing into private pockets, often prefer to deal with religious organizations deemed to use money in more constructive ways, as well as being relatively independent of state control. Foreign donors, including those with no formal links with religious organizations, such as USAID, may pump money into church organizations because they are believed to be more honest and accountable in disbursing funds than governments. Nevertheless, some reports suggest that such favoured recipients have, on occasion, utilized foreign funds for their own personal purposes.<sup>47</sup>

This section has argued that leaders of mainline religious organizations often occupy important roles as interlocutors between state officials and their followers, helping the former to rule without too many overt challenges. To maintain their influential positions it is of course necessary for leaders of the mainline religions to retain their followers; as far as possible, to prevent defections to competitor religions and to bring religious ‘dissidents’ under their control. It is for this reason very important for them to head off religious challenges to their position. In recent times, leaders of mainstream Muslim and Christian bodies have found themselves threatened by a remarkable increase in unofficial sects and churches. The next section shifts the emphasis to the second focus of this account: popular religious groups in Africa and their impact upon state-society relationships, including democracy.

### **Challenging Hegemony: African Popular Religions and Democracy**

For many ordinary Africans, ‘politics’ is something to be kept at arm’s length as far as possible. It is something rather unsavoury, connoting the often dubious goings on between elite groups. Yet, on the other hand, it is undeniable that many ordinary people took to the streets in the 1980s and 1990s to demand democracy.

The dividing lines between politics and other social actions is clear cut within the social sciences, leading us to assume that reality may be neatly divided. But it is often not easy to put ‘messy’ reality into such discrete pigeonholes. For example, accounts of African politics often find it difficult

clearly to pigeonhole individuals in relation to their class, because the once regularly employed Marxist categorization often seemed of little use in many African contexts. In the same way the relationship of religion and politics from a lower class perspective is usually dealt with by seeking to explain popular religious movements by pointing to apparently 'hidden' political objectives.<sup>48</sup> Yet this approach is problematic. Not least of the problems is that, as elsewhere, it is difficult to be sure where 'religion' ends and 'politics' begins in Africa. For example, during the colonial period, 'religious' movements were often also concerned both with anti-colonial goals and socio-cultural reform.<sup>49</sup> The point is that it is not analytically necessary to ascertain whether a religious or a political or a social objective is paramount. It is useful to understand movements as often involving a combination of motivations that defy easy, and precise, categorization. Spiritual and material concerns interact within very fluid boundaries in a context where many Africans relate to religion as a means of solving a number of personal problems, some of which will be material issues.

As noted earlier, in order to perpetuate hegemony successfully it is necessary for the dominant stratum to maintain a more or less consensual moral order with the status of 'common sense'. Subordinate classes accept such a moral order, according to materialist analysis, out of a 'false consciousness'. This allows the ruling elite to rule through consent rather than relying too heavily upon coercion. Yet, this should not be taken too far in the African context, where hegemony is rarely achieved on the basis of social and popular consent alone; coercion is always a highly useful option for the authorities to maintain social control. The false-consciousness argument is not a convincing explanation as to why subordinate class Africans obey the authorities (when they do, which is by no means all of the time); obeisance is undoubtedly as often due in part to a well-founded fear of the consequences of not toeing the line. Because of the fear of the consequences as well as the social divisions extant in most African societies, it is usually difficult to see unified political actions undertaken by subordinate classes in pursuit of their class interests. It is by no means clear whether subordinate class Africans perceive their interests to be best fulfilled by class action rather than by 'plugging in' to the networks of reciprocity and by creating popular vehicles of mobilization, including religious ones.

A 'popular religion' can be defined as a community expression of a group desire to achieve a religious satisfaction not forthcoming from extant mainline religious organizations. Both Marx and Weber stress how the 'contingent nature of the relationship between the content of an ideology and the social position of the group who are its 'carriers' is of fundamental importance when seeking to understand the social role of ideology.<sup>50</sup> What this suggests in relation to dominant religious traditions in Africa is that their leaders will be

concerned with perpetuating and promulgating their religious vision (which is also an ideology of domination) so as to strengthen and bolster both social and theological positions.

Virtually every African country has a fair number, sometimes a very great quantity, of religious faiths and sects, often characterized by a mixture of Islam, Christianity and indigenous religions; often mainline Christian churches compete with Protestant fundamentalist and independent churches. Popular – usually Sufi – Islam competes with the orthodoxy championed by the *ulama*. Both sets of popular religions are alternative sources of orthodoxy because every religious believer contends that his or her religion is actually one in which their own conception of orthodoxy is paramount.

Bayart contends that in Africa popular religions are the ordinary person's way of cocking a snook at authority.<sup>51</sup> Mbembe argues that 'the current explosion of religious revivalism in Africa is another ruse by the common man to create a counter-ideology and alternative political space in response to the totalitarian ambitions of African dictators'.<sup>52</sup> Thus, popular religions may be potent and overt symbols of political opposition. However, this is not to claim that all popular religions are by definition politically oriented, forms of anti-establishment political mobilization in religious garb. Spiritual benefits are almost certainly commonly regarded as highly important in accounting for an individual's religious choice. It may also be important how the state *perceives* a popular religion's aims. For example, in central Africa British colonial authorities regarded the Watchtower sect as a politically revolutionary movement masquerading as a religious group.<sup>53</sup>

In the post-colonial era orthodox Islam has done its best to dominate its (popular) Sufi rival because the latter is often viewed as being opposed to the religious and social status quo. The wider point is that in Africa, states often appear to have trouble trying to dominate popular religious sects, to ensure that they operate according to the official rules laid down in the context of the state's hegemonic politico-administrative framework.<sup>54</sup> Apparently substantive manifestations of anti-regime opposition must be taken seriously. The ramifications of this are clear, and obvious: regimes must do all they can to reduce challenges to a minimum; one effective way is to bring real or imagined dissidents into the state nexus. If this is not possible, they must be neutralized.

As already argued, religion is a force that may have significant political implications for both ruler and ruled alike. Within Christianity there is a multiplicity of conceptions concealed behind an often spurious religious unity which, for example, may seek to establish the efficacy of liberation theology amongst all 'third-world' Catholics regardless of differences in culture, tradition, history and political structures. Within every supposedly universal religion there is a multiformity of forms of religious belief corresponding

to the class or strata in focus. Gramsci identifies a ‘Catholicism of the petit bourgeoisie and of city workers, a women’s Catholicism, an intellectual’s Catholicism equally varied and disconnected’.<sup>55</sup> This is not to argue that there is one religious orthodoxy that somehow mutates according to social or class context, but rather that there are many different ‘Catholicisms’ of which the hegemonic, orthodox version is but one. The same goes for Protestantism, which does not even claim to have the same uniformity and universality as Catholicism. Within Islam there are several extant conceptions corresponding to socio-cultural contexts:

- culturally dominant, strongly patrimonial Islam of northern Nigeria, northern Chad and northern Cameroon. This is an Islam inextricably linked to notions of social hierarchy and political power;
- Sufi Islam of the *marabouts*, itself is divided into ‘pure’ and ‘corrupt’ forms;
- Islam of discrete ethnic groups often carrying much cultural and racial baggage;
- ‘fundamentalist’ Islam (or, Islamism) often championed by radical higher education students (who may wish to recreate Iran or Saudi Arabia’s theological perfections).

These categorizations by no means exhaust all the extant types of popular religious belief among Africans. The main point, then, is that various forms of popular religion relate to the perceptions, ethics and conventions of various groups divided by occupation, class or gender, and expressed through religious terminology. In Africa, reflecting an often bleakly unpromising economic and political reality, popular religions often express themselves in the apparent hopelessness, the lack of expectations of the mass of the people, where religious faith is regarded as the key to this worldly material favour. As Kabongo puts it: ‘Africa at prayer looks for a miracle, it is a daily appeal for the ultimate solution to illness, poverty, and misery. That is Africa of the night, of Saturdays and Sundays. Africa of the week and of the day “manages”, and corrupt and corrupting individuals die between the two worlds, struggling to survive’ (my translation).<sup>56</sup>

While there may be merit in the argument that religion offers a variety of, mainly spiritual benefits, it is also possible to claim that popular religion is basically materialist, quite distinct from the more idealistic speculations of Weber’s ‘genteel intellectuals’.<sup>57</sup> A materialist conception of popular religion relates to particular forms of ordering and organizing religious communities. Fundamentalist sects challenge the orthodox religions both intellectually and materially. Such is the concern with the haemorrhaging of followers, that the mainline Christian churches in Africa make two lines of attack.

On the one hand, the fundamentalist churches are accused of being little (if anything) more than American Trojan horses, while at the same time the orthodox churches rush to incorporate evangelical elements (glossolalia, faith healing, copious biblical allusions) into their services. The fact that millions of Africans – in common with many others in Latin America, East Asia, and the Pacific Rim – have converted to fundamentalist Christianity over the last decade or so suggests strongly that such people find something of value there they do not in the mainline churches. At the same time, the dominance of some fundamentalist churches by wealthy foreign (especially North American) pastors, helps to confirm the association between their religion and personal prosperity. This is because they offer a vision of western consumerist success that serves as a powerful inducement for less materially successful people, an appeal over and above their purported spiritual benefits.

Despite leaders' claims to political indifference, the political significance of the fundamentalist Christian churches is manifested in a number of ways. Followers often have no problem in endorsing their westernized leaders' aversion to socialism. Quite apart from the fact that to many socialism defines itself as a negation of the very existence of God, further it is born of a first-hand experience with various types of 'African socialism', which for many people is associated with bureaucratization, elitist power concentration, waste and ideological inflexibility.

To many fundamentalist Christians in Africa, religion is concerned with social issues in the context of the creation of a counter-culture involving a communal sharing of fears, ills, jobs, hopes and material success. Earthly misfortune is a result of lack of faith; God will reward true believers. Adherents believe that people's redemption is in their own hands (or rather in both God's and the individual's hands), and that expectations that government could or should supply all or even most of people's needs and deal with their problems is misplaced. African fundamentalist Christians do not usually seek to form political vehicles for their social and economic aspirations; they believe in the biblical idea that political leaders should rule, senior religious figures should stick to spiritual matters. What this implies is that followers often do not involve themselves in the cut and thrust of political competition; but it does not mean that when a clearly political issue arises with significant connotations the fundamentalist Christian community necessarily remains silent. For example, fundamentalist Christians in Nigeria are a significant political voice, especially over the issue of Sharia law in some northern states.

Contrary to some accounts, however, it should not be assumed that such people will necessarily be strongly in favour of democracy. Huntington quotes approvingly projected figures of Christianity's growth in Africa from some 236 million believers in 1985 to 400 million early in the twenty-first century.<sup>58</sup> He appears to assume that this will necessarily be instrumental in

forcing demands for democratization onto political agendas, although he argues correctly that most extant democracies are countries with significant proportions of Christians. Another interpretation, however, is that many such Christians follow apolitical or politically conservative sects with either no interest in democracy per se or they are believers in ‘strong’, that is, authoritarian, earthly government, difficult to rouse to political voice – except when their religion seems to be under attack. Overall, however, the political consequences of the spread of Christian fundamentalism – including Pentecostalism – appear unclear, with few, if any, differences, between political attitudes of various kinds of African Christians.

We have already noted that fundamentalist Islamic groups are rare in sub-Saharan Africa. Why? The region’s numerous popular Muslim groups seek to follow their own Islamic orthodoxies which almost invariably will run counter to the purist, reforming versions of Islam forwarded by the often arabicized elites of the *ulama*. Running contrary to the purist trend are the desires of ordinary Muslims, confronted in their religion both by the demands of the modern nation-state for national unity as well as by the Muslim elite for them to follow the ‘true’ Muslim path of orthodoxy. Unlike popular Christian sects, popular Muslim groups, especially in urban areas, often function as de facto conduits of opposition and of anti-regime solidarity. This underlines how the state and the *ulama* do not have the monopoly of religio-social organization between them. As Fossaert notes: ‘men-in-society [sic] are organized in and by the state, but they are also organized in families, in village communities, in provinces, in workplaces, in factories in which the state is not always the proprietor, in trade unions, in parties and in associations and in other ways which the state does not necessarily control’ (my translation).<sup>59</sup>

This fails to mention religious organizations of popular focus, but at that level, Islam is an important expression of community; at local level it is an ‘anti-structure’ expressing what Turner refers to as ‘the powers of the weak;’ in its own way, a counter-society.<sup>60</sup> In urban surroundings, manifestations of Muslim community, often outside of the state’s control, include Muslim associations (such as the Hamadiyya Shadhiliyya of urban Egypt), Sufi brotherhoods and community mosques. The basic framework of worship in Islam – small groups of men meeting to pray five times a day and to study the *Quran* together in the central mosque on Fridays – often mitigates against factionalism, at least at the community level. Islamic observances, such as Friday prayers, the annual fast (Ramadan), and the *hajj*, are public manifestations of faith, part and parcel of Muslim community life. Membership of Sufi brotherhoods in Africa adds a contextualising cultural dimension to the universal religious solidarities. Sufi traditions are of mystique routes to communion with God, involving religion-derived song and dance meetings and the worship of local Muslim saints. The Sufi brotherhoods

provide an additional source of identity in towns and cities, while the Muslim obligation to provide *zakat* (alms) is a fruitful source of patron–client relationships.<sup>61</sup>

What this amounts to is that Muslim civil society is not the product of universalizing Muslim cultural currents. In Africa, conceptions of Islam are often moulded by many cultural situations – including ethnicity – that adapt the orthodoxies of the Arabist Islamic conception for local use. Consequently, popular Islamic organizations can – and often do – carry political potentialities, making states both suspicious and wary of them. The state seeks to dislocate Islamic resentment by controlling and defusing it. That is, the state ‘must “put its nose” into the life of the Muslim community’.<sup>62</sup> However, African states have often been unsuccessful when trying to mobilizing Muslim communities via a secular discourse focused on national unity.

In conclusion, popular Islamic modes may be subversive to the interests of both religious and political elites. Three types should be noted: (1) women’s groups, (2) millenarian sects and (3) ethnic-religious vehicles of opposition. First, there is the Islam of the associations of Muslim women, sometimes described as ‘apolitical’.<sup>63</sup> However, such organizations, delivering practical help for Muslim females and, in many cases, a wider orientation to change the position of women, work to improve the position of female Muslims in various ways. Such objectives are actually highly political at the level of gender politics, working as they do towards forms of women’s liberation. Growing numbers of female Muslims find employment in the modern sector – as, for example, teachers and secretaries – as a direct result of the spread of education. Second, there are the millenarian sects, such as that associated with the Cameroonian Muhammad Murwa, active in Kano in the late 1970s. Third, there are ethno-religious groups utilizing Islam as a cultural referent to focus community anger at perceived political and economic marginalization. Examples include Balukta in Tanzania and the Islamic Party of Kenya.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Africa is a culturally and religiously diverse, politically complex, region of over 40 countries. The background to Africa’s democratic transitions in the 1990s was an array of apparently unpropitious structural characteristics which, many observers believe, make it unlikely that many African countries will be able to consolidate democracy. On the other hand, impetus for reform was widespread – the result of a combination of domestic and international factors linked to the region’s endemic economic and political problems. Fundamental reforms of state structures and institutions were widely deemed necessary, both at home and abroad, to correct things.

Many African democratic transitions began with popular agitation against unelected leaders which gradually developed into demands for multi-party elections and democratic governments. But, protest-led, reformist-oriented, actions, often led by religious, especially Christian leaders, 'did not necessarily lay a firm foundation for the subsequent institutionalisation of democratic regimes'.<sup>65</sup> We examined the role of leaders of mainline Christian – especially, Catholic churches – as well as those of national Muslim organizations and other important Muslim actors, including popular Islam. We saw that senior religious figures typically forged close relationships with the state, which tended to make them ambivalent towards the concept of fundamental political change.

Overall, the trajectory of Africa's democratization has been, on balance, disappointing. It is clear that in the context of generally inauspicious political and economic factors, religious actors have not been able to help advance democracy beyond a stage often characterized by cosmetic rather than substantial changes.

## NOTES

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Accepted for publication March 2004.

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