

'African religion', Islam and Christianity: Religion and society in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

History-485

Professor Felicitas Becker

Summer 2007, day, at Burnaby Campus

It is striking that within the last century, Africa has been transformed from a region marginal to monotheistic religion into one of its centers. A hundred years ago, a large majority of Africans followed indigenous religions centred on spirits and ancestors. Today, most Africans profess either Islam or Christianity; at least nominally and often fervently. People in Africa look upon religion as eminently relevant to both everyday survival and dealing with acute crisis. Religion has been implicated in everything from resistance against colonization to the struggle for democratization, development, civil unrest and the HIV/AIDS crisis.

This course offers a succession of case studies, based on primary literature and extracts from the rich literature on the history and anthropology of religion in Africa. Although individual sessions focus on one of the three traditions of religious thought, discussion will be geared towards identifying similarities, differences and interactions between them.

The questions the readings address include: Why did people in Africa adopt Christianity under colonialism? Why did Islam, too, spread during colonial rule? How did Muslim communities accommodate Christian rule? How did Africans deal with the European 'cultural baggage' attached to Christianity? How did they go on using notions from indigenous religion alongside Muslim and Christian ones? Why is the fear of witchcraft so widespread in contemporary Africa? How have religious leaders and communities confronted, or exacerbated, the crisis of the post-colonial state? How do religious beliefs shape responses to the AIDS crisis?

Readings:

- David Robinson, *Muslim societies in African history*. As well as historical case studies, this book contains a useful background section on the origins and teachings of the Muslim religion.
- The 'custom courseware' is essential to follow the class.

Additional readings will be available through JSTOR as well as distribution in class. Some background volumes will be put on reserve. Please ensure that you have the readings in good time.

Professor's contact details:

My office is AQ 6008; email fbecker@sfu.ca

Office hour: Tuesday 12-1pm.

Assessment will be based on a presentation in class, class participation, a paper proposal and bibliography, and a final paper, as follows:

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|--------------------|-----|
| Class presentation | 20% |
| Participation | 25% |
| Paper proposal | 20% |
| Final paper | 35% |

Presentation topics will be shared out in the first session. Your essay topic has to be **different** from your presentation topic! Sample essay topics can be obtained from me, but you are encouraged to come up with your own topic.

As a fourth-year seminar, the course is geared towards discussion and meant as a forum within which to practice the verbal expression, exchange and development of historical interpretation. Regular attendance and participation are essential; as are curiosity and the readiness to rethink seemingly familiar concepts.

Topics week by week:

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2-5: (Mostly) Southern African topics

Week 2: Is there such a thing as 'African religion', and if yes, what is it about?

Week 3: Spirits, prophecy and resistance in pre- and postcolonial Africa

Week 4: Christianity, education and colonialism in Southern Africa

Week 5: The churches, colonialism and Apartheid

Week 6-9: East African topics

Week 6: Islam and Somali society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

Week 7: Women and Islam in Africa: East African examples

Week 8: Local religious practice, mission interference and politics: Kenya

Week 9: AIDS and religious practice in East Africa

Weeks 10-13: West African topics

Week 10: Witchcraft and social relations: the Camerounian example

Week 11: 'Jihad' in Northern Nigeria

Week 12: Islamic education in West Africa

Week 13: 'Independent' African churches and 'Gospel of Prosperity'

Week by week outline:

Week 1: Introduction.

This session will be an opportunity to meet each other, compare interests, and identify some of the basic problems that we will grapple with in this course. They include:

What makes a religion a religion? Do we want to speak of 'religion' at all, or rather of religious practice?

What are the fundamental characteristics of African religion, Islam and Christianity?

Did religions help maintain order in African societies? How?

Or did they foster change?

If both, when did they do the one and when the other?

How did religion/ religious communities/ religious practice change in the course of the history of African societies? How did they change history?

Week 2: Is there such a thing as 'African religion', and if yes, what is it about?

When social scientists stopped dismissing African societies as 'primitive', in the middle of the twentieth century, they began to look for African equivalents of the codified religions of Europe. They found a lot: communal rituals such as sacrifice, initiation and dance; beliefs in spirits, ancestors, prophets and witchcraft. The first of the two texts assigned for today gives you an idea of how anthropologists have conceptualized these unfamiliar religious phenomena. It is outside the regional framework (dealing with Northeast Africa), but is a rare example of an anthropological study that has endured for decades. The second presents a critique of the way historians have imagined 'African traditional religion' and suggests that maybe it is misleading to talk about 'religion' at all.

Reading: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Chapter 4: spirit and the social order'.

Paul Landau, 'Religion' and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model', *Journal of Religious History*, 23, 1 (Special issue: Africans Meeting Missionaries; February 1999), 8-30.

Week 3: Spirits and prophecy in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa: the 'Xhosa cattle killing' and the aftermath of the Mozambican civil war.

This is our first encounter with the way African religious notions affected the course of history. We will discuss two different episodes where people fell back on the notions of spirits and spirit mediums/prophets to find ways to deal with traumatic social situations: the encroachment of colonialism and the aftermath of civil war. They are presented very differently. Peires sees the Xhosa 'cattle killing movement' as a step in the terminal decline of the independent Xhosa polity; a desperate, irrational action. Honwara's study of spirits in post-civil war Mozambique is a case study not in mobilization for resistance, but in reconciliation. Variations of the same basic religious notions become active in very different contexts and to very different effect.

Reading: Jeff Peires, *The dead will arise*, extracts.

Alcinda Honwara, 'Undying past'.

Week 4: Christianity, education and colonialism in Southern Africa

The Christian tradition of learning arrived in Africa with very specific institutions: the Mission and the Christian 'Mission school'. Education had a very deep, but ambiguous and often hard-to-trace, effect on its recipients. It was never only about the transmission of religious ideas, but also implanted cultural forms and values. History students encountering this phenomenon for the first time tend to think that schools served to indoctrinate Africans; that teachers somehow 'forced' their culture on their students. The readings for this session are chosen to give you a better sense of how teachers and students had to 'negotiate' to make education happen, and how the imported ideas mixed with local ones.

Readings: Isabel Hofmeyr, 'We spend our years as a tale that is told', extracts

Paul Landau, *The realm of the word*, extracts

Week 5: The churches, colonialism and Apartheid

‘Christianity, civilization and commerce’: these were three things that European colonialists claimed to bring to Africa. It is hardly surprising if missionaries have been accused of helping to ‘colonize the mind’ of Africans. But they were practically dependent on African people and had no control over the way their teachings were interpreted. In South Africa, different churches have found themselves on every side of the social and political divide. We will look at how some very diverse church organizations defined their positions towards white domination and Apartheid.

Reading: J De Grouchy, *The church struggle in South Africa*, extracts.

Week 6: Islam and Somali society

Currently, Somalia is notorious as a ‘failed state’ that has not had an effective government since 1992. Since the so-called ‘Islamic Court Movement’ has taken over the capital Mogadishu, it is also discussed as a way-station for Islamic terrorists. In this session we will try to understand the historical role of Islam in Somali society and the background to the emergence of the ‘Islamic Court Movement’. Somali culture is ancient and has been Muslim for some thousand years, in war and peace. The role of Islam in motivating the struggle both against colonial rule and recently against Mogadishu’s warlords can only be understood in the context of Somali society. As in Nigeria, colonialism has led to enormous changes, but nevertheless we can also discern continuities.

Readings: Said Samatar, *Oral poetry and Somali Nationalism*, chapter 3.
Roland Marchal, ‘Islamic political dynamics in the Somali Civil War’

Week 7: Muslim women: how marginal?

This session does not aim to allow you to come to a general conclusion on whether being Muslim is ‘good’, ‘bad’ or indifferent for women in Africa – there is no general answer to that question, and anyway it depends on one’s own values. It merely aims to give you a sense of the variety of ways of life among Muslim women, of the problems and opportunities they have faced at different moments in history. We will be looking at very different situations: the educational work of the daughter of a Muslim ruler on one hand, the religious practices of relatively poor Muslim women on the other. We will look for similarities and differences both in their concerns and in the way they addressed them.

Reading: Jonathon Glassman, *Feast and riots*, extracts.
Janice Boddy, *Wombs and alien spirits*, extracts

Week 8: Local religious practice, mission interference and politics: Kenya

As in Southern Africa, so in Kenya, many recent converts to Christianity were threatened by the encroachment of white settlers. But relations between missionaries and local people panned out differently. Unlike in Botswana, there was no centralized African kingdom, and missionaries and converts got embroiled in debates over local cultural practices that the missionaries found unacceptable. The result was the development of ‘independent’ African churches that increasingly competed with missionary-run ones. After Kenya’s independence from Britain, it was the ‘mainline’ Churches, which African

priests had inherited from missionaries, that came to the forefront of societal opposition to an abusive regime.

Reading: Derek Pietersen, 'Writing in revolution', From John Lonsdale and E S Atieno Odhiambo, *Mau Mau and nationhood*.
Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing mount Kenya*, extracts.
Galia Sabar-Friedman, 'Church and State in Kenya, 1986-1992: The Churches' Involvement in the 'Game of Change'. *African Affairs* 96, 1997, 25-52.

ASSIGNMENT DUE in class.

Week 9: AIDS and religious practice in East Africa

That religious views are enormously important in addressing AIDS is obvious. The opposition of the Catholic Church to condom use is only the most notorious example. All faiths present in Africa have views on proper sexual and gender relations. From the point of view of standard biomedical prevention programmes, these views are often unhelpful. Still, they are an essential part of the way people make sense of the catastrophe that is the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, the religious notions that come into play here have deep roots in twentieth-century history and politics.

Reading: John Iliffe, *The African AIDS epidemic. A history*, extracts.
Ruth Prince, 'Salvation and tradition', on debates about AIDS among Kenyan Luo

Week 10: Witchcraft and social relations: the Camerounian example

Notions of witchcraft have long been widespread in many African societies. Anthropologists have shown that they allow people to formulate and act upon many social problems. The readings for this meeting serve two aims: first, to familiarize you with the idea that witchcraft beliefs, whether in European or African history, are not merely unenlightened superstition, but made a lot of sense under certain social conditions and in the presence of certain intellectual traditions. Secondly, to show how people in post-colonial Cameroon have used notions of witchcraft to think about the problems of their state and society.

Reading: Ralph Austen, 'The moral economy of witchcraft', in J Comaroff, *Modernity and its malcontents*.
Peter Geschiere, *The modernity of witchcraft*, extracts

Week 11: Jihad in Northern Nigeria

The occurrence of warlike Islamic reform movements in nineteenth-century West Africa is barely known in the West. We will try to understand how ethnic tensions, religious debates, social change and local politics interacted in creating these movements.

Readings: David Robinson et al, extracts from *Readings in African history*
David Robinson, relevant chapter from *Muslim societies in African history*.

Week 12: Islamic education in West Africa

Like Christian mission education, the Islamic educational system differed clearly from African practices, but in a different way. It was focused on schools, but ones that taught the reproduction of sacred texts and other forms of religious knowledge, rather than practical literacy and numeracy. Nevertheless, Islamic education too was implicated in social stratification and in colonial politics. We will examine two different cases to understand how.

Readings: Louis Brenner, 'Controlling knowledge', introduction.
Jean Boyd on Nana Asma'u and women's education.

Week 13: From 'Independent Churches' to the 'Gospel of prosperity' in West Africa.

In West Africa, Christian missions started their work well before colonialism. During colonial rule, there were strong movements of emancipation from the mission churches, resulting in the foundation of numerous 'African Independent Churches' (as they became known among anthropologists and experts in religious studies). Since independence, churches in West Africa have come under strong influence from American Pentecostal movements. All of these movements arguably sought answers to contemporary social problems, as well as compromises between local culture and Christian teachings. Using a colonial and a post-colonial example, we will again see how colonialism and political independence have shaped the lives of Africans in different ways.

Reading: J.D.Y. Peel, *Aladura*, extract.
Birgit Meyer, 'If you are a witch, you are a devil'
Paul Gifford, *Ghana's new Christianity*, extracts.