

## ***Religion and mobility in Africa and in the African diaspora***

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### ***Position paper***

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In the face of the many perspectives offered by the theme of mobility in its relationship with religion, we chose to restrict ourselves to its purely spatial dimension. As for the term *religion*, it refers generically to churches, religious movements, brotherhoods, not to say beliefs, that are African or have an African origin

We shall approach this theme from three angles, viz. religions and diaspora, pilgrimages, and the circulation of religious « imaginaries » via the media.

### **Religions and diaspora**

We start from the observation that migratory flows, spatial mobility and the internationalisation of churches, brotherhoods and religious movements of African origin are today experiencing unprecedented growth. Admittedly, the internationalisation of religion is not a new phenomenon in Africa, just consider the missionary churches of the colonial era. However, we will not deal with this missionary phenomenon here. In contrast, it would be interesting to consider the trans-Atlantic establishment of African religions and their local transformations. We are thinking of Candomblé, Santería, Voodoo, Rastafarianism, and so on. We will pay special attention to the prophetic African movements of Christian or Muslim inspiration that were transformed into independent churches or brotherhoods when African countries gained independence (e.g.,

Kimbanguism, Harrism, Muridism and Aladura) and became trans-national in character several decades ago. Trans-national as they may be, churches and brotherhoods are still deeply rooted in benchmarks that nourish the imagination and materialise in pilgrimages. These churches and brotherhoods bring about multilateral movements that remain linked to their original centre. In contrast, the more recent churches of Pentecostal or evangelical inspiration are of a more *rhizomatic* character. Indeed, Pentecostal movements are, in the words of the authors of *La globalisation du religieux (The Globalisation of Religion)*, « movements that have an affinity with globalisation », « movements that function best according to the logic of international and multilateral networks »<sup>1</sup> We are possibly witnessing a decentralisation of African churches or a multiplication of centres of the Pentecostal and Evangelical type. In short, our study could lead to a reassessment of the connection between « centre » and « periphery », but also of the rhizomatic aspect of African religion in motion.

More broadly speaking, the theme of religious mobility is part of the connection between religion and globalisation. The authors of *La globalisation du religieux* remind us of the fact that « globalisation is the result of multiple, partly contradictory movements involving complex relations between local, regional and global issues, and implement new forms of identity statements, notwithstanding the fading of borders ». These complex and opposite relations are fundamental to the expression of « glocalisation », which the authors exemplify by the « development of diasporas that combine a transnational logic with a process of integration in the "terre d'accueil" »<sup>2</sup>. The link between local and global will be at the heart of our investigation. This means that it might be appropriate to discuss what Peter Geschiere and Birgit Meyer have called the « dialectics of flow and closure »,<sup>3</sup> which are characteristic of globalisation, i.e. the dialectics of « global flux » and « cultural closure », « culturally homogenizing tendencies of globalization » and « cultural heterogeneity »<sup>4</sup>.

We shall pay particular attention to churches, brotherhoods and religious communities in the African diaspora. The concept of « African diaspora » used to refer to the Afro-Americans, before it was applied to Africans who have immigrated more recently in Europe or in another continent. We intend to accept both perspectives. We must also consider the mobility of religious brokers and of churches and religious brotherhoods between different African countries, cross-border or not. The term « diaspora » should be used with care, because, as Gerrie Ter Haar states, it may constitute « an ideological instrument to support the idea that Africans do not belong in Europe but in Africa, their real homeland »<sup>5</sup>. In fact, in another book Gerrie Ter Haar regrets the fact that the new churches of

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<sup>1</sup> Bastian, J-P, Champion, Fr., & Rousselet, K., *La globalisation du religieux*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Bastian, Champion et Rousselet, 2001, *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, B. & Geschiere, P. (ed.), *Globalization and Identity. Dialectics of Flow and Closure*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Meyer, B. & Geschiere, P. (ed.), 2003, *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Ter Haar, G., *Strangers and Sojourners. Religious communities in the Diaspora*, Leuven, Peeters, 1998, p. 5.

African origin in Europe are often labeled « African Churches », whereas they want to reach non-Africans as well as Africans and they often have a universal dimension<sup>6</sup>.

In general, even if the movement of the faithful belonging to these churches and brotherhoods rarely has a truly religious impetus, as migrations often have economical or political motivations, we should ask whether and to what extent the value migrants attach to their religious belonging is heightened by their displacement. Following Meyer and Geschiere, we can see a reference to « people's attempts to "fix the flow" and mark boundaries in the ongoing flux of globalization processes »<sup>7</sup>.

Speaking of mobility does not mean considering only relocations of the faithful and of churches and brotherhoods. One should also consider the transformations brought about by the establishment of these churches and brotherhoods in new contexts. It is equally necessary to examine the hybridisation or *bricolage* of religious practices and beliefs and the social and territorial reconfigurations created by the mobility of religion as well as the exchanges it brings about.

Moreover, we cannot exclude checking the hypothesis that churches of the African diaspora in Europe could materialise a resistance, or even a defence, against discrimination, and therefore provide a haven where to withdraw one's own identity, be the latter strictly religious, or involving an Afrocentric, nationalist or even ethno-nationalist dimension.

## **Pilgrimages**

Pilgrimage is a ritual practice, which in Africa is rooted in more ancient religious traditions, such as the territorial cults, which we would like to see being considered during this colloquium.

Pilgrimage in Africa pertains first of all to the sacred sites of African churches and brotherhoods situated in Africa, such as the Kimbanguist site of Nkamba in Congo-Kinshasa, or the Mouride city of Touba in Senegal. We can also cite sites of Christianity in Africa, such as Kibeho in Rwanda. Today, the practice of pilgrimage in Africa has expanded to non-African sacred sites. We obviously think of Christian places of pilgrimage in Europe (such as Lourdes and Fatima), but also of places like Jerusalem or Mecca. Finally, we could compare the practice of pilgrimage to that of massive religious gatherings in public spaces (e.g., soccer stadiums) during campaigns of evangelism of the new neo-Pentecostal and evangelical churches.

We cannot discuss the subject of pilgrimage without mentioning the famous book by V. and E. Turner : *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978)<sup>8</sup>. Although V. and E. Turner identified pilgrimage as a « kinetic ritual »<sup>9</sup>, they nevertheless analysed it from a temporal rather than spatial perspective. It will be recalled that V. and E. Turner, in support of Van Gennep's *Rites de passage*,

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<sup>6</sup> Ter Haar, G., *African Christians in Europe*, Nairobi-Kenya, Acton Publishers, 2001, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Meyer, B. & Geschiere, P. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> Turner, V. & E., *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture. Anthropological Perspectives*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1978, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, V. & E., *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

consider pilgrimage as a liminal endeavour, and the pilgrim as a « threshold » or « in-between » person. Pilgrimage is seen as a process comparable to initiation, although it remains invisible or « hidden »<sup>10</sup> and for the pilgrim it is not a means to elevate their status, but rather « a means to attain a deeper level of religious participation »<sup>11</sup> and spirituality. As a *liminoid* phenomenon, the pilgrimage is an exceptional time, outside of daily life. That is, it has one of the attributes of liminality: society moves from structure to *communitas*, i.e. to a community that is « not structured or that is structured in a rudimentary and relatively undifferentiated way »<sup>12</sup>.

In their book *Contesting the Sacred. The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*,<sup>13</sup> John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (1991) disagree with the Durkheimian view of religious celebrations as a factor of social unification and order, as well as with the Turnerian view of pilgrimage as a factor of subversion of the social order. They do not content themselves with understanding the pilgrimage from the point of view of social relations, but they consider it to be « a realm of competing discourses »<sup>14</sup>, i.e. as a domain in which discourses compete. In order to define the pilgrimage they develop the notion of « empty vessel », « in which every pilgrim puts whatever they intend to put there »<sup>15</sup>. In addition, the authors propose the triad « person », « place » and « text »<sup>16</sup>, the combinations of which are, in their view, constituents of the pilgrimage, in which sacrality is focused simultaneously on a place, a person and a text (scriptures or sacred texts).

In a more recent book entitled *Reframing Pilgrimage. Cultures in Motion* Simon Cole and John Eade (2004) went back over the orientation of *Contesting the sacred*. They criticise the notion of « empty vessel » for still assuming « borders » and « boundaries »<sup>17</sup>, in a sense separators from the exterior ; which has the effect of emphasising the place of pilgrimage. The authors of *Reframing Pilgrimage*, for their part, wish to concentrate their approach to pilgrimage on movement. Moreover, the authors argue that the triad « person », « place » and « text » and its combinations proposed in *Contesting the Sacred* do not take movement into account. Linking mobility to modernity, they see the pilgrim as an emblematic figure of modern life. Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999) already considered the pilgrim to be « the figure that seems best to crystallise the mobility that is typical for a religious modernity build upon personal experience »<sup>18</sup>, « a figure typical for religion in movement »<sup>19</sup>. Given that for the authors of *Reframing Pilgrimage* mobility is « mundane », the « exceptional » and

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<sup>10</sup> Turner, V. & E., *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Turner, V. & E., *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Turner, V., *Le phénomène rituel. Structure et contre-structure*, trad. de l'anglais par G. Guillet, Paris, PUF, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Eade, J. & Sallnow M.J. (ed.), *Contesting the Sacred. The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Eade, J. & Sallnow M.J. (ed.), *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Chiffolleau, S., « Review of *Reframing Culture. Cultures in Motion* ». In *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 136, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Eade, J. & Sallnow M.J. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.8-9.

<sup>17</sup> Coleman, S. & Eade, J. (ed.), *Reframing Pilgrimage. Cultures in Motion*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Hervieu-Léger, D., *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999, p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> Hervieu-Léger, D., *Ibid.*, p. 98.

marginal nature of the pilgrimage, emphasised by V. and E. Turner, is weakened, if not rejected. They distinguish types of movement at work in pilgrimages, viz. « movement as performative action », « movement as embodied action », « movement as part of a semantic field » and « movement as metaphor »<sup>20</sup>. The authors' goal is « to explore the interfaces between forms and representations of mobility within diverse cultural and religious contexts » and to find the processes of « sacralisation of movement, persons and/or places »<sup>21</sup>.

We shall pay particular attention to the different types of movement at work in the pilgrimage. A pilgrimage consists not only of visiting a sacred place or centre, but also of a sacred journey. In the perspective opened up by *Reframing Pilgrimage*, we would appreciate an examination of the complexity of the movements at work during a pilgrimage, and, more generally, of the links between this mobility and modernity. Finally, we shall not ignore the parallelism, not to say significant link, between pilgrimage and tourism, which leads one to examine the motivations of pilgrims, the notion of the « sacred », and the role of the journey in religions. Initiating quite a literature on the subject,<sup>22</sup> Victor and Edith Turner wrote, in 1978 already, « a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist »<sup>23</sup>.

## **The Circulation of the Religious Imaginaries via the Media**

The circulation of the religious imaginaries via the Media is a third phenomenon that allows us to explore the relationship between religion and mobility. The “religious imagination”, as we conceive of it, refers to the complex whole of mechanically produced images, the idea of the imagined community and the French idea of the imaginary<sup>24</sup> from a religious angle. Just as people travel across cultural and geographic settings, so do religious narratives and practices. Often, the spread of religious beliefs runs along printed media and electronic channels. Via the internet, satellite television and mobile telephone infrastructures, Christian, Muslim, Jewish and other religious communities can continue to exist and religious messages can be transmitted and received beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. Daniel Dayan has pointed out that the joint circulation of images and migrant groups can shatter or remodel religious beliefs.<sup>25</sup> The media are capable of introducing new forms of religiosity and of changing the composition of the religious beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is imperative to try to understand how African and Western societies are transformed through the influx of African

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<sup>20</sup> Coleman, S. & Eade, J. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 16-17.

<sup>21</sup> Coleman, S. & Eade, J. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> See, in particular, Badone, E. & Roseman, Sh.R. (ed.), *Intersecting Journeys. The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2004; Swatos, W. H., *On the Road of Being There. Studies in Pilgrimage and Tourism in Late Modernity*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Turner, V. & E., *op.cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Appadurai, A., *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Dayan, D., ‘The Pope at Reunion: Hagiography, Casting, and Imagination’. In: *Media Anthropology*, E.W. Rothenbuhler and M. Coman (eds.), London, Sage Publications, 2005, p. 170.

<sup>26</sup> Dayan, D., *Ibid.*

migrants that continue to exercise their faith and who use modern media technologies to carry on their religious networks and rituals. Less drastic, but nevertheless equally significant, is the subtle transformation of African popular cultures, both on the continent and in diasporic settings, through the influence of foreign religious media.

We will attempt to study “African religious mediascapes.” The concept of “mediascape” was introduced by Arjun Appadurai (1996), for whom contemporary societies are marked by a criss-crossing of images, commodities and peoples. “Mediascape” points at the heterogeneity of media and information technologies, the distinct social trajectories of electronic and printed narratives and images, and the repertoires of narratives that are provided by the new media technologies. We are in particular interested in the ways in which African religious media (television, radio, videotapes, DVDs, audiotapes, newspapers, magazines and the internet) shape distinct religious communities, imaginaries and practices, and in the ways in which they travel through regional, (sub)national and transnational settings and feed into religious practices.

Taking a historical perspective, we can already point at the use of print and audiovisual media by Christian missionaries to convert African colonial subjects. On a more recent note, confessional radio- and television channels of Christian, Islamic and syncretic religions are now flourishing on the African continent. In Cairene coffee shops, one can listen to taped Qu’ranic verses while pentecostalist television shows transform Ghanaian households into spiritual arenas where demonic agencies fight with the Holy Spirit. The current ubiquity of religious media products is the result of the liberalization of the press that occurred during the mid-1990s in many African nations. Foremost Pentecostalist groupings have embraced audiovisual communication technologies to spread their beliefs and to attract new converts. Yet, the increasingly sophisticated forms of teletechnology not only serve the various strands of African Christianity. It suffices to mention the lectures on Yoruba *orisa* religion which are broadcast on Nigerian national television channels and the dissemination of audio- and videotaped sermons by representatives of political Islam in Mali to point out that other religious traditions also make use of the new media technologies.

As Walter E.A. Van Beek and Thomas D. Blakely<sup>27</sup> have noted, African religions are known for their flexibility and variability. There is a constant give and take between and among various religions as well as an incessant interaction with the political, economic and cultural environment. We can thus expect African religions to change in terms of ritualistic practice and beliefs when modern communication technologies transmit the religious message. Questions that need to be addressed are: How do “electronic churches”, religious audiovisual tapes and magazines interact with or displace the immediate and established physical religious gatherings and rituals? How do electronic images move within and beyond the church, the mosque and the temple? And how does this generate particular media rituals and media ceremonies?

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<sup>27</sup> Van Beek, W.E.A and T.D. Blakely, “Introduction” in *Religion in Africa*, T.D. Blakely, W.E.A. van Beek and D.L. Thomson (eds.), London/Porstmouth NH, James Currey/Heinemann, 1994, p. 15.

Scholars like Hent de Vries (2001)<sup>28</sup> and Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (2006)<sup>29</sup> urge us to take into account the “mediating” power of the media channels and their products. Not only the so-called Book Religions but also more traditional religions depend upon material mediators that make the spiritual and the transcendental more accessible for believers. The moving image, the printed word and the materiality of the television set, the camera, or any other “medium” may acquire a sacred power similar to that of diviners, spirit mediums and power objects. We have to ask whether and, if so, how religious media (in their materiality and images) substitute a diverse range of experts such as healers, diviners, pastors, prophets and marabouts. This perspective enables us to gain an understanding into new but significant ways in which “the sacred is (re)presented, contained, concealed, generated, constructed and (re)distributed.”<sup>30</sup>

Often, the circulation of images co-occurs with moving people. Arjun Appadurai already remarked in his magnum opus, *Modernity at Large* (1996), that the media and the migrant are interknitted. Urry confirms this idea when he writes that « sociétés diasporiques ne subsistent que grâce à de très nombreux voyages, corporels, imaginatifs et de plus en plus virtuels, à la fois vers la mère-patrie et vers d’autres sites de la diaspora »<sup>31</sup>. Searching for moving images and sounds from “home”, migrants often purchase or consume religious media products that have originated in their countries of origin. Therefore, the conference likewise wants to address the issue of modifications in belonging, identity and signification provoked through the reception of religious images in migrant settings.

If we want to understand the intersection between media and migration, one particular social category merits considerable attention: the religious media broker. Mass media never circulate in a social vacuum. Religious authorities and practitioners commission the production or acquisition and distribution of confessional prints and broadcasts and thus become media entrepreneurs. We aim to delve into the creation of “mass mediated religious experts” and question how the dissemination of religious images and sounds runs along flows of money and other forms of capital.

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<sup>28</sup> de Vries, H., ‘In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies.’ In *Religion and Media*, H. de Vries and S. Weber (eds.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 3-42.

<sup>29</sup> Meyer, B. and A. Moors, ‘Introduction’. In *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere*, B. Meyer and A. Moors (eds.), Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Hackett, R., ‘African Art and Religion : Some Observations and Reflections’. In: *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24 (4): p. 299.

<sup>31</sup> Urry, J., *Sociologie des mobilités. Une nouvelle frontière pour la sociologie ?*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2005, p. 156.

