



Postscript

Àe Lo ve Boat, or the Elementary Forms of Charismatic Life

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Four years ago, an esteemed colleague of mine almost fell asleep at a talk I gave on prophetic forms of Christianity in Central Africa. After the talk, when I asked how she could be so uninterested in such a fascinating topic, she told me, ‘Well, there is too much already about Pentecostal and other new forms of Christianity in Africa: you should go back to the study of more traditional forms of religion’ (meaning my previous study of West Africa in which I had been looking at the persistence and transformations of an initiatory culture). She had a good point: a lot of interesting things that are happening in Africa are neglected by those of us who study Pentecostalism, although how to *not* study Pentecostalism in Africa is becoming increasingly difficult, since it is a very pervasive form of religion. Here I want to take the opportunity to suggest that the study of charisma is not a rupture with any other form of previous anthropology of religion but, in many ways, a refreshing return to the founding fathers of the discipline such as Durkheim, whose centenary I am celebrating with my subtitle. I also want to suggest that new forms of African religion are experienced by their believers not as a rupture but sometimes as a return to a purer and very old form of religion that Africans have forgotten via a destructive combination of internal and external agencies. The return to a ‘forgotten God’ is a common theme in several trends of prophetic Christianity and also of Islam, though less explicit in Pentecostal discourses.

Let me first stay within the anthropological tradition. Africanist anthropologists once looked at kinship structures, lineages and clans, gender, alliances, wealth in people, matrilocality, polygyny, bridewealth, household composition, parenthood, the developmental cycle of domestic life, age sets,

and, sometimes, even at families, although this term was always suspicious: could it be used transculturally as an analytical category, or was it only a Western institution with its own history and therefore of little analytical value? Love, and how to make it, was rarely present in the typical Africanist monograph. Marriage was often considered and it even provided the title of well-known monographs, but until the milestone volume edited by Parkin and Nyambwaya (1987) it was more often than not analyzed as the mechanism by which reproduction was achieved rather than as an end in itself (for a thorough review see Burnham 1987).

This was the past of our discipline. Anthropologists did a very good job of describing how African societies reproduced themselves in time. However, they also transformed themselves, and somehow anthropologists started falling behind, using models that were difficult to apply to a constantly changing reality. Some scholars, like those mentioned above and a bit later Caroline Bledsoe, whose work wonderfully embodies a transition from different moments in anthropological preoccupations (cf. Bledsoe 1982 with Bledsoe 2002), urged us to catch up, but the truth remains that even today there is still a good deal to catch up with. Perhaps societies evolve more rapidly than the models used by social scientists to study them.

Whether anthropologists are more interested in ruptures than in continuities or vice versa I do not know, but I have heard fierce accusations, more or less justified, in both directions. Some people argue that anthropologists have tended to ignore history and to look only at presentist or synchronic structures; others, in contrast, blame them for only looking at mechanical systems of production and reproduction across time ignoring such important things as agency, individuals, or 'self-realization' and 'wealth in knowledge', to cite two important concepts that, as Jane Guyer has argued in her insightful work, should accompany the anthropological insistence on mechanic models of accumulation and reproduction (Guyer 1993; Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995). The truth may be somewhere in between: some anthropologists have paid insufficient attention to history; others may not have focused enough on individual agency.

In any case, what remains true is that the introduction of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity in Africa has represented a refreshing way of thinking about history and agency in the continent, and we can say that thanks to Pentecostal churches the literature on time and on structural ruptures and continuities has been the locus of very fruitful debates in African studies over the last decade. In this sense at least, anthropologists are indebted to these churches. In many people's view, Pentecostalism can be seen as a rupture: a rupture with tradition, with collective notions of community, with a 'pastness'

often reified and perceived by converts as strongly negative and potentially linked with notions of evil. Although studied mostly in relation to Pentecostalism, this rupturist element can also be applied to conversion to other forms of Christianity and to Islam.

The studies in this issue are a good example of how to catch up and start becoming interested in what our friends, interlocutors, or interviewees in the field are interested in: making Africa a place in which to meaningfully dwell, to construct for themselves and to leave for their offspring, and in a religious context in which concepts such as 'family' and 'home' can be used in a non-problematic way since they are invoked as structuring principles by the actors themselves. New forms of life around 'home' are here analyzed in conjunction with some of the emerging topics in the anthropology of Africa: gender, sexuality, love, imagination, AIDS, morality, choice, expectations and aspirations, uncertainty, and fertility.

The collection will be particularly useful to scholars given its focus on women as agents of transformation and of the creation of new forms of subjectivity and subjectivization. Women's roles in religion in Africa have been studied before, as has the relationship between religious beliefs and institutions in the control of sexuality and reproduction. Yet ethnographic accounts of what is happening today in this particular domain are scarce, and beyond the popular perception that women are very important actors in the new forms of Christianity in the continent the ways they actually engage in the making of public and domestic spheres have been largely undocumented. These studies will provide other scholars with a solid ground from which to start asking questions comparatively about female agency in religion, and about how this agency may also help us understand emerging forms of and ideas about masculinity and manhood.

Heterotopias, which is a strong theoretical line that crosses the studies (strongly framed in the introduction to the volume), proves to be a very fruitful platform for exploring the potential that religious imagination in Africa has for creating and sustaining new forms of life. No matter how it is defined, religion depends on heterotopias and heterochronies: the existence of 'out-of-place' places and of 'out-of-time' times in which the moral community can be constantly constructed, remembered, and reconstructed through ritual effervescence. Whether you call the ritual at stake 'Intichiuma', as was the case of the Arunta clans of Durkheim's seminal text, or 'Christian meeting,' as is the case in the texts of this volume, is secondary. Here Pentecostal studies meet Durkheimian approaches to the foundational dimension of religion as a place-and-time making device that operates by invoking, evoking, or provoking 'other' places and 'other' times.

In 1967, using a language we would no longer endorse today, Foucault (1984 [1967]) compared modern heterotopias with what he called the ‘critical’ heterotopias of primitive societies—heterotopias as mechanisms for domesticating life crises such as coming of age, loss of virginity, and so on. Primitivisms aside, the connection between the life crises and institutional heterotopias that he signaled should be explored; it may be a good way of studying the proliferation of churches in the navigational and uncertain lives of today’s African citizens (or subjects?) living in a constant, if not increasingly, critical state. Churches, paradigmatic ‘places to feel at home’ as they are—to invoke here the title of a book (Welbourn and Ogot 1966) on African independent churches almost coetaneous to Foucault’s seminal text—are becoming new shelter zones, new ‘internal frontiers,’ to revive Kopytoff’s term, where pioneering African women and men are reproducing but also innovating domestic forms of lives (van der Kamp 2011; cf. Kopytoff 1987). At the end of his text on heterotopias Foucault claims that there is an intimate connection between heterotopia and imagination, especially visible in the figure of the boat. In a society without boats, he seems to believe, imagination sinks and policing takes over. He failed to notice that, together with awaking our geographical imagination, boats can also be the locus of romantic imagination for excellence (obviously he was writing before the television series *À la Recherche de la Dernière Femme* (1977) and certainly before the Titanic romance directed by James Cameron twenty years later). To today’s reader, love may replace the sinking boat and prevent the emergence of the hyperpolicing state announced after the wreck. Indeed, notions of home and of romantic love, which arrived in Africa in the luggage of Western or Brazilian Charismatic missionaries (and in telenovelas), have become the new Foucaultian ‘boats’ where imagination is still the fierce and proud captain in command. This is an unexpected new arrival to the African and anthropological landscape, and one for which, I would say, social sciences were not well prepared. Researchers confronting today the emergence of romantic love and of new forms of intimacy, like those whose work appears in this issue, must indeed be imaginative in their epistemological efforts.

The editors of this volume have invited their authors to reflect on relations and not individuals. In my view, this is a much welcome emphasis that will make this volume a refreshing must read in the anthropology of Christianity. Among anthropologists there is the tendency to assume that the notion of the Christian self is almost like a Leibnitzian monad, and that in places where society was previously based on more relational modes of personhood (call it ‘dividual’, ‘fractal’, ‘participatory’, ‘distributed’, or what have you), a newly introduced Christian discourse and practice is going to construct individuals who somehow do not relate as much as their non-Christian elders. This line of

thought is a double-edged sword: on the one hand it has the advantage of linking modern notions of selfhood and interiority with Christian notions of personal dignity and integrity, in an ‘affinity elections’ way that may be as fruitful as the affinity found by Weber between Protestant beliefs and capitalist ethos (and related to it as well). On the other hand, however, it fails to recognize that in Christian thought relation is not only a very important aspect of the person, as reflected in personal practices based on empathy, charity, or love, but, as many authors have argued, a condition of possibility for the epistemological and ontological possibility of the autonomous person (see Spaemann 2006 for a full development of this notion from a philosophy of Christianity point of view; for a more anthropological approach to the relational foundation of Christian notions of personhood and individual see Porqueres i Gené 2009). As the introductory essay makes clear, the break with the past and the engagement with Christian notions of personhood found in Charismatic conversion do not mean a rupture with relations and the emergence of a neatly bounded unrelated self, but rather the emergence of new forms of relations that need to be explored ethnographically. In the opening page of her novel *Silas Marner* (1861), a document about Calvinistic life in nineteenth-century rural England, George Eliot, talking about occasional visitors to a village such as peddlers and knife-grinders, stated: ‘No one knew where wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother?’ (Eliot 1981 [1861], 1). As today in Pentecostal Africa, relation in Protestant England was then part of the material at hand with which individuals, in their social and cognitive bricolage, intuitively explain other individuals.

I stated above that Pentecostalism can be regarded as a rupture, as *difference*. This, I think, is quite accepted by the mainstream literature on the anthropology of Christianity, yet it can also be regarded (here I am, I fear, a bit more of a heretic) as a return, as *repetition*. Pentecostals’ foundational event was the day related in the Bible (Acts 2:1) when the twelve apostles of Jesus experienced the same spiritual force that had animated their master. That day, just before they were filled with the Holy Spirit, history was stuck, immobile: among them there was nothing but melancholy and no future—no imaginable action was possible that would make the charismatic past return. How were twelve mortal people to recreate the work of a God-related spiritual leader? Then the famous ‘tongues of fire’ event occurred. The very moment they were filled by the Holy Ghost history took off again. Their presence became synonymous with Jesus’s presence. They could heal and do miraculous deeds in his name, as the Bible tells us. Two thousand years later, the arrival of Charismatic forms of Christianity in Africa revives that Pentecostal

foundational moment and gives a new thrust to a life that for many Africans was becoming, as they often say, burdensome. Much like the twelve apostles, many young Africans under Pentecostalism feel imbued with a new spirit that makes them ‘move ahead,’ to use a directional, teleological idiom often invoked in Africa to gloss what we would rather call ‘modernity’ or ‘development’. In their will to move ahead, Pentecostals model themselves on the moment of Pentecost, which in itself was a recreation of a previous model, or, to use a theological concept, *figurae* (Jesus’s deeds).

This is my own reading of the rupture: as difference and repetition, going ahead while going back, weaving imaginations of the future with *figuras* of the past. By going back to Biblical models and trying to reenact a religious form of life from the past, Charismatics produce a new history with new notions of self and family, but this production takes place with a myriad of microlocal negotiations. This is what ethnographers must carefully explore. ‘I want my son to be modern,’ the ‘animistic’ old father of a neo-Pentecostal friend in Guinea Bissau told me and Marina P. Temudo. There had undoubtedly been a biographical rupture in our friend’s conversion to Pentecostalism, starting with a geographical one: he had converted in The Gambia, far from his village, to which he later returned to claim some land and build his Christian ‘home’. But the rupture had been domesticated by his elderly father; indeed, not all African elders could afford to let their young men simply go away, and not all converts to Pentecostalism would abandon an old man or refuse to claim land they were entitled to.

I am sure that, much like our Guinea-Bissauan traditionalist father, many of our revered ancestors in the study of African systems of kinship would have wanted us to be modern and to study what people are doing in order to keep their societies going. By reading these fine studies I get the sense that these anthropologists are not rupturing with any previous anthropological tradition, but ‘moving ahead’, modernizing the tradition by focusing on issues that were not relevant, perhaps even nonexistent, in the days of previous anthropological analyses. They model themselves on the strictures of rigorous ethnographic observation and careful analysis (let it be our veneered *figura*), then set off to do something utterly new. In the process they introduce the missing love boat in Foucault’s seminal analysis of heterotopias and imagination.

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