



PORTRAIT: JEAN COMAROFF

Religion, Society, Theory

Jean Comaroff

Colonial frontiers, we have long been told, put conventional categories at risk. I grew up on one such frontier, itself an anachronism in the late-twentieth-century world—apartheid South Africa, where many of the key terms of liberal modernity were scandalously, publically violated. Religion was one of them. Some have argued that the act of separating the sacred from the secular is the founding gesture of liberal modern state making (Asad 2003: 13). In this, South Africa was a flagrant exception. There, the line between faith and politics was always overtly contested, always palpably porous. Faith-based arguments were central to politics at its most pragmatic, to competing claims of sovereignty and citizenship, to debates about the nature of civilization or the content of school curricula. As a settler colony, South Africa had long experimented with ways to ‘modernize racial domination’ (Adam 1971) in the interests of capitalist production, frequently with appeals to theology. After 1948, in contrast with the spirit of a decolonizing world, the country fell under the sway of Afrikaner rulers of overtly Calvinist bent. They set about formalizing a racial division of labor that ensured that black populations, the Children of Ham, remained economically subservient and politically marginal.

The liberal Jewish community in which I was raised included refugees from the Holocaust and was a distinctly nervous fraction of the dominant class (Bourdieu 1984: 186). Its members were white but not of the *Herrenvolk*, and they were acutely alive to the perils of racial persecution. Torn between keeping their heads down and voicing moral protest, many found solace in the call of another Zion, in a strong identification with the State of Israel, which, in 1948, had established itself as an ethno-nation on the world geopolitical map. But South Africa had also spawned other visions of a Promised Land,¹ other images of Zion, other millennial aspirations that would color my own understanding of religion and society. While I was schooled in a system dubbed ‘Christian National Education’ (Davies 1978), my consciousness was suffused, from early on, with competing political theologies, with a vibrant brace of liberation movements, for instance, in which evangelical revival confronted—not always peaceably—European socialist thought and New World critiques rooted in the work of Du Bois, Garvey, and Fanon.

Such a world predisposes one, if not to skepticism about *any* claim to sovereign truth, at least to an acute awareness of the context dependence of all orders of faith and knowledge. It also fosters distrust of the evolutionary conceits of Western modernity, among them, that secularism advances steadily as enchantment declines, or that religion is everywhere identifiable as that which pertains to the divine or the supernatural. For what can, or cannot, claim to be ‘religion’ (as against heresy, superstition, magic, satanic rite), and who is or is not authorized to



decide, has long been a domain of conflict here. It has also provided an idiom for establishing hegemony. Early European settlers and evangelists, some denounced as heretics at home, often deemed Africans to be devoid of all trace of religion, finding no ready counterpart for their own idea of faith among peoples who had no term for ‘religion’ or ‘belief’—peoples whose word for ‘spirit’ (*moya*, ‘breath’ in Setswana), albeit an echo of Old Testament usage, seemed irretrievably corporeal in conception. Colonial missions labored hard to instill a Protestant ontology—and the mercantile *geist* it bore—in African consciousness. But the dialectic set in motion between European and African religiosity would yield unforeseen mutations, blurring Cartesian divides, queering reigning creeds, calling new revelations into being. In the process, Christianity was Africanized, and Africa Christianized, distilling novel self-awareness on all sides, not least of the ways in which, as Asad (1993: 123) has put it, “power create[s] religion.” It also revealed ways in which religion creates power and showed how people might act upon that awareness, both as colonizer and colonized.

All this made it plain to me that—while the category of religion was irreducibly relative, at least in the Euro-modern world—a Judeo-Christian definition of the concept was hegemonic, not only in theological orthodoxy and public culture, but in much scholarly analysis as well. In contrast to some anthropologists (e.g., Bloch 2010), these evident facts do not lead me to conclude that no viable theory about religion is possible, that we would do best to free ourselves of the term as an analytical category in favor of a putatively more universal one such as ‘ritual’. For me, it is precisely the inescapable embeddedness of religion in particular social-historical formations that is the point of departure for useful critical investigation.

Of course, it is all a matter of what one takes to be ‘theory’, what one understands as its objects and objectives. For Bloch (2010: 5), to be worthy of its name, theory must contribute to “the general understanding of what kind of animals human beings are.” Ritual is more useful than religion in this regard, he argues, because it can be “described as a specific type of modification of the way human beings communicate” (ibid.: 8), this on the basis of universal cognitive qualities of human existence.² Religion, by contrast, is not a ‘natural kind’. Its definition remains socially and historically arbitrary. As will be clear, my understanding of theory and its uses in relation to religion, or any other aspect of the social world, is rather different. I am not primarily interested in identifying ‘natural’ kinds or establishing “general claims about human beings” (ibid.: 5) that presume a metaphysical naturalism and an unmediated analytical vantage. My ethnographic training has reinforced my predisposition to see all categories of human thought and being—including analytical terms like ‘ritual’, which I deploy a great deal in my work—as inflected by specific social systems, systems of meaning and signification. In this sense, I am interested less in theories of religion than in theories of religion and society. It is precisely the nature of this relationship and its historically specific transformations that fascinate me—most specifically, its modern transformations, for those are the ones that our epistemological apparatus engages most effectively, at least in the human sciences (cf. Casanova 2011). What, with twenty-first-century hindsight, is the sustained relationship between the Protestant ethic and the nature of capitalism, for instance—not to mention the nature of ‘modernity’ itself? The terms of human knowing and acting are never simply determined, once and for all, by genealogy or context. Nor are they unchanging or without contradiction and incoherence.

For me, useful social analysis is that which strives, within those limits, to gain reflexive purchase, from a distinct disciplinary location, on particular phenomena of varying scale, generality, and temporality. In my earlier work, for instance, I interrogated the ironic role of evangelical Protestantism as a vehicle for both the colonization and the emancipation of southern African peoples. I did so as an anthropologist and as a person from the global South, one especially sensitive to the fact that European religiosity was embedded in a particular hegemonic order of social,

textual, and material relations. I was aware, too, that this ostensibly universal faith was saturated with specific sensibilities and values whose implications were profoundly worldly and central to imperial efforts to transform African societies and economies wholesale. The interplay that ensued would significantly refashion the European Christian legacy.³ In the process, the ethnocentrism of the latter and its ideological role were often made apparent, raising new sensibilities and a host of independent movements, and prompting anguished debate among scholars, politicians, and churchmen as to who should be deemed Christian and where the line should be drawn between church and sect, enlightened belief and primitive mentality. As this suggests, the role of religion was of signal importance to the modern colonial project *tout court*, as the necessary ‘supplement’ (Derrida 1976) to secular discourses of reason, civilization, race.

This approach implies a vision of grounded theory in which lived practice—including self-conscious theory making itself—is always seen to exist in a dynamic relation with immediate context and with larger-scale processes of transformation, one in which tangible facts, the concrete, cannot be understood without recourse to abstraction, to theory, and vice versa. This also implies reflexive critique: a concern not merely with how social worlds are constituted, but also with how they might conceivably have been different and how their present might give rise to better futures (Horkheimer 1972). This impetus allies me with analytical approaches produced on other authoritarian frontiers—with the kind of immanent critique developed by the Frankfurt School, for instance, which probes contradictions, differentiations, and paradoxes in the constitution of given worlds, thus to estrange their ruling assumptions and to envisage other, emancipatory possibilities.

Anthropology and Its Spirits of Resistance

One such critical engagement, for me, was with the self-imposed limitations of the ethnographic tradition in which I was trained at the London School of Economics in the late 1960s. While the wider world around us was seething with the onset of an already late-capitalist, post-colonial moment, British anthropology remained committed, for the most part, to presentist models of small-scale, non-Western polities, still clinging to the possibility of accessing the totality of relations of a society, the essential workings of a culture, in any one place and time (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997). To be sure, there were more advantages to this approach than is often acknowledged these days, not least its facilitation of bold theory making (John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff 2012). But the sprawling Tswana-speaking ‘homeland’ that confronted me as a neophyte fieldworker in the days of high apartheid simply could not be reduced, either ethically or methodologically, to a bounded, self-reproducing ‘society’ or clutch of ‘villages’. Neither could the ever-evolving Zionist churches—whose prophet leaders so captured local imaginations—readily be described as ‘traditional’ religions. How, then, to acknowledge, in the particularity of the local, forces of ‘awkward’, translocal scale, forces whose historical sociology demanded attention in an age that seemed post-anthropological (Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 2003)?

It was with this task that I wrestled in *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985). These overtly syncretic religious movements provided the most sustained, emotionally compelling focus in the lives of depleted rural communities on the periphery of the South African industrial economy, where they served as its racialized, reserve army of labor. The product of secession from the colonial missions and offshoots of late-nineteenth-century American revival, these churches, being sites of mimesis and refusal, bore witness to the forces that had shaped this local world. Wielding the creative power of signs, they made the gospel speak of this-worldly redemption, providing a moral *lingua franca* for a new society of colonized workers and of African

nationalist struggle. In seeking to expand my ethnographic gaze to encompass the multi-scalar forces at play in this creative enterprise, I grafted Weber's sense of the Protestant ethic onto Durkheim's view of the pragmatic power of ritual and deployed both in a reading of imperialism and race-class formation inspired by Marx. In so doing, I strove to demonstrate something especially evident to those raised in the global South: the role of religion in the profane business of building—and surviving—markets and empires.

This work drew lively responses and various strains of critique, some directed at my blatant eclecticism, some uneasy with my readiness to juxtapose 'experience-near' ethnography with theoretical abstraction. Anthropology has always had a strongly empiricist strain, of course, although our founding fathers were more ready to posit bold hypotheses about society and culture than many of their late modern heirs (John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff 2012)—of which more in a moment. A few commentators expressed discomfort with what they saw as an over-readiness to dwell on the social and material aspects of religion at the expense of its spiritual dimensions. Some raised this same point in response to *Of Revelation and Revolution*, the two-volume study that I undertook with John Comaroff in the 1990s, which explored the relationship of religion to colonialism by returning to the 'long conversation' between British Nonconformist missionaries and the Southern Tswana peoples (Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 1991; John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff 1997). The study aimed to pursue the implications of this case for a more general understanding of historical agency: the missionaries were, after all, self-conscious 'agents', not just of God's Kingdom, or even of a 'revolution' of hearts and minds, but of the whole mode of life bred of the Great Transformation that had nurtured their civilizing outreach. Within this framework, the study sought also to rethink the concept of culture in relation to the concepts of hegemony and ideology. And it aimed to do so by way of grounded theory, by training an ethnographic eye on those who seeded a state of colonialism from which the colonial state took root: the churchmen, merchants, and politicians who were the cultural foot soldiers of the Empire. This historical anthropology required some experiments in methodology, for instance, assembling an archive that went beyond conventional texts to include objects and archaeological remains, objects that bore witness to the practices that built the substance of a colonial world. Why were trivial commodities so central to the larger spiritual design of God's agents? Why should paper, indigo print, or starched church uniforms have taken on almost magical salience on all sides of the nineteenth-century frontier? How did window glass or the replacement of round dwellings with square ones come to index the advance of civilization for its champions? And how did the fetishism of these objects expand imperial commodity markets and link neophyte proletariats in Africa to workers in Liverpool and Manchester?

Once more, these studies have evoked lively commentary. Some critics have argued yet again that we lay undue stress on the worldly, rather than the sacral, dimensions of religious life. This, we suggest, says more about the Cartesian sensibilities of our critics than those of the subjects on whom we focus, for most of whom the spiritual and the pragmatic domains of life are not as nicely segregated. At the same time, we have also shown, in some ethno-historical detail, how categories such as 'religion' and 'belief' emerged as distinct constructs, themselves a consequence of the dialectics of the colonial encounter and part of a larger semantic field that included dualisms distinguishing 'African' from 'European' ways, 'tradition' from 'modernity' (Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 1991: 218ff.). But southern African devotional practices have never been wholly contained within these categories, being embedded in a diverse, labile field of thought and action. Neither has our intention ever been to present a reified analysis of 'religion as a cultural system' (Geertz 1973) *sans* social and material grounding or distinct from larger historical processes.

Yet there are still those who persist in reducing our dialectical analyses to more simplistic, unidirectional arguments. Joel Robbins (2007), for example, accuses us—bafflingly, in light of

the seven hundred or so pages of *Of Revelation and Revolution*—of asserting ‘cultural continuity’ over ‘change’ (terms that we deliberately deconstruct) in our historical anthropology of the colonial mission (see the more nuanced reading of this same project by Masquelier in this section of the volume). And there is Ruth Marshall (2009), who takes us to task, despite all the evidence to the contrary, for failing to acknowledge the profoundly transformative effects of the colonial moment. The fact that others have charged us with doing precisely the opposite—of being all too ready to identify the presence of large-scale processes on local African landscapes (among them, the rationalizing effects of missionization, colonial law, and literacy, or of proletarianization and the growth of commodity markets)—should give them, Robbins and Marshall, that is, pause. So, of course, should a close reading of the texts. There certainly *are* contemporary anthropologists strongly invested, as an article of professional faith, in the longevity of local systems of knowledge ‘in their own terms’, those who are eager to defend the resilience of these systems in the face of global forces besetting the “little guys” (Graeber 2002: 1223) all over the map. As Geschiere notes in his perspicacious commentary in this section, those approaches are more plausible objects of the charge of ignoring the transformative effects of colonialism, Christian or otherwise. Both those who accuse us of peddling cultural ‘continuity’ or ‘domestication’ and those who argue the obverse fail to appreciate that arguments couched in terms of dialectical histories presume a more carefully specified, reciprocal play of cultural and material forces, a more subtle co-existence of processes of transformation and reproduction, a careful distinction between the form and the content of those processes. Assigning the proportions of ‘change’ and ‘continuity’ in any given situation—if, indeed, these impoverished analytic terms retain any theoretical utility whatever in their own right, which we doubt—is a matter of historically situated analytical judgment. Does the act of conversion imply a radical break, an all-or-none substitution of new ‘models of time and belief’? Or does it involve a more subtle, more complex accommodation of old and new? And why would one reduce that complexity to sweeping, simplistic adjectives of limited heuristic utility? To be sure, the dialectics of the colonial encounter—those involving temporality and belief, religion and conversion—have themselves shifted over the long history of African modernity. The early colonial moments that gave rise to unambiguous efforts to domesticate Christianity, in the southern African contexts that we describe, are hardly the same as the late-twentieth-century post-colonial conditions that have seen the rise of zombies or the efflorescence of ‘born-again’ faiths. The latter call for a different appraisal of the interplay of constituent elements and precipitating forces, none of them reducible to the simplifications embodied in terms like ‘continuity’ or ‘change’. An informed historical anthropology of colonialism—indeed, an informed historical anthropology of anything—deserves better theory work than some of our critics have proffered in preference to our own.

Zombies and the Violence of Abstraction

I myself have never been unduly concerned that the anthropological craft was under threat or that the world to which it bore witness was tragically on the wane. ‘Primitive’ societies, as we all now know, were never the independent isolates that they were made to be in much classic ethnography. What is more, the discipline has always drawn on theory from the broader human sciences (from biology to political philosophy, psychoanalysis to linguistics) to universalize and to ‘scale up’, that is, to situate its ethnographic cameos within wider fields of social, political, and economic relations and forces. What remains distinctive about anthropology is its commitment to the role of local meaning and modes of practice in shaping human activity and its preoccupation with the interplay of subjective value and objective conditions—however complex,

labyrinthian, or dauntingly ‘global’ these might be. We respect the fact that our subjects, like we ourselves, seek ways of interpreting the world, ways of engaging the conditions of their being. And, as theorists as varied as Émile Durkheim ([1912] 1976: 277) and Walter Benjamin (1968: 253ff.) would have predicted, in the face of ‘fragmentary realities’, the quest for meaningful practice readily finds a mystical, even a messianic, ‘impetus to action’.

The ethnographer’s ‘ear to the ground’ makes her sensitive to these shifts in hermeneutic register—not least, in registers of religious imagination and their intimate entanglement with the challenge of ordinary life. Take the matter of zombies. When John Comaroff and I returned to South Africa after the end of apartheid, we had the promise of new-found freedoms on our minds. The last thing we expected to encounter in the rural communities we knew best was an epidemic anxiety about the living dead. Yet there could be no denying this preoccupation, not only in Tswana communities, but elsewhere in South Africa as well. Far from exotic tales from the backwoods, the presence of zombies was widely discussed in popular culture. Respectable local newspapers carried banner headlines proclaiming “‘Zombie’ Back from the Dead”;⁴ defense lawyers in provincial courts argued that their clients had been driven to murder by the zombification of their kin;⁵ and illicit zombie workers were named in formal labor disputes.⁶ In 1995, the Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders, appointed by the Northern Province administration to investigate an ‘epidemic’ of occult violence, reported widespread fear of the figure of the zombie—“a person who is believed to have died, but because of the power of a witch ... is resurrected ... [and] works for [him/her]” (Ralushai et al. 1996: 5).

While witchcraft has long been integral to Tswana thought, zombies have not. I was struck by the particular features attributed to these specters in vernacular parlance: zombies (the common term here is *diphoko*, from the Afrikaans *spook*, or ghost) were spoken about on the street, in private backyards, and in churches. But their mention was almost invariably related to another prevalent concern—the disappearance of work, this amid radical shifts in the post-apartheid economy under the impact of policies of liberalization. In optimistic policy-speak, the situation was termed ‘jobless growth’. We found the discursive splicing here suggestive: long-standing conceptions of witchcraft, or *boloi*, had come to embrace zombie making, the brutal reduction of others to instruments of production, to insensate beings stored, it was said, “like tools” in sheds, cupboards, or oil drums of their creators—the latter usually, if not inevitably, people of conspicuous new wealth whose source was not readily explicable (cf. Ralushai et al. 1996: 50). In a world of flexitime employment, it was even said that some workers were made into “part-time zombies” (ibid.: 224–225), whose exhaustion in the morning spoke of involuntary toil on the night shift.

How to make sense of the poetics of this local nightmare, one that seemed to be haunting widening sectors of the national population? If ever there was a figure that typified the sudden rise of joblessness, the mysterious production of wealth without work, and the apparently occult grounding of neo-liberal capitalism in local experience, it was the zombie. A creature of “estranged recognition” (Clery 1995: 114) in perplexing times, s/he was all surplus value, not costly human needs. This kaleidoscopic figure, the ultimate embodiment of flexible, ‘non-standard’, asocial labor, was not unprecedented, of course: it has come to us in a range of ethnographic, historical, and literary accounts from Africa and the New World that point both to subtle differences and to non-coincidental similarities. Zombies appear simultaneously translocal and local, simultaneously planetary and (refracted through the shards of vernacular cultural practices) profoundly parochial, just as they appeared, long ago, on the plantations and in the mines of far-flung colonies.

As has been noted before, our concerns here were not, in the first instance, theoretical or conceptual.⁷ We came across the zombie through an empirical conjuncture: it was the force of

historical fact, rather than abstract analytical interest, that compelled us to make sense of it *in situ*. But by what ethnographic means does one comprehend human musings on the visceral experience of personal devaluation, both as moral being and as labor power? How to capture a world in which jobless growth appears as the mystical capacity of some to thrive on the lifeblood of others? How does one make sense, in other words, of new religious and social movements that accompany radical change in conditions under which people must produce and reproduce their lives and their self-worth? These are not matters that can simply be proven by empirical means, although attention to the texture of local discourse certainly takes one some of the way (cf. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 1999b). Zombies bespeak intimate community frictions. But they also register the impact on these local worlds of larger forces at once palpable yet opaque, of the violent abstraction that has withdrawn capital—lifeblood—from what once were viable modes of production to invest it elsewhere, away from workers with contracts to cheaper, casualized labor, to machines, to offshore production, to finance markets that promise the capitalist dream of producing wealth without workers. When we first lived in the rural, Tswana-speaking northwest, upward of 80 percent of all men spent a sizable proportion of their lives in the migrant economy. By the mid-1990s, that figure had dropped to below 15 percent. Grasping the impetus behind such radical transformation requires an act of “inspired guesswork” (Leach 1961: 5), both by the organic thinkers who live the effects and by those seeking to understand their situation. What is required is the courage—the foolhardiness, some would say—to move between the concrete and the concept, poetics and political economy, to hypothesize about the workings of large-scale abstractions so as to posit their relationship to the grounded realities that meet our gaze.

One must be prepared to bear the risks of the ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills 1959). As with some of my earlier work, the accounts of these transformations—of the culture of neo-liberalism and of what John Comaroff and I have termed ‘occult economies’ (Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 1999a) and ‘millennial capitalism’ (Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 2000)—have drawn both rich engagement and robust critique. Much of the latter was concerned, once again, with our readiness to link religion to political economy, local life to large-scale forces (Moore 1999), ethnographic methods to what one pair of critics termed the ‘meta-narrative of modernity’ (England and Leach 2000)—phrased by them in such a way as to sound suspiciously like a synonym for ‘Theory’ in the upper case. Such an association, they claim, “undermines what is unique in the ethnographic method—its reflexivity, which gives subjects authority in determining the context of their beliefs and practices” (ibid.: 225). This objection is at once myopic and irresponsible (Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 2003); it both overvalues the role of academic analysis and underrates the impact of structural forces on ‘local worlds’. Local beliefs and practices do not exist in zero-sum relation with macro-forces of modernity. As we, and others, have shown repeatedly, they exist in complex dialectic, a shifting interplay, which itself determines the nature of what is taken to be ‘local’ and/or translocal in the first place. To be sure, determining how and what is local, and how and in what proportion it is situated in worlds beyond itself, is a constant challenge to anthropology. After all, it is global historical processes, such as the marginalization of communities described above, that threaten the authority of local subjects to determine the context of their beliefs and practices—not the proclivities or activities of social theorists. Certainly, those impacted by the kinds of job loss we witnessed in South Africa made their own narrative accounts of this epidemic fully audible and in an idiom very much their own. In an effort to understand their situation, and that of many other structurally equivalent peoples in an ever-more-interdependent universe, why would one *not* draw on the Theory—the ‘meta-narratives of modernity’, if you will—provided by foundational thinkers concerned with the long history of global interdependence, that is, on the likes of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber?

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Late Capitalism

In fact, in order to understand the late modern world, including changes within it concerning the meaning and status of ‘religion,’ my most recent work has returned to precisely the kinds of questions that animated these founding social thinkers. Weber might have been right about many things in this respect, but he could not have been more wrong in his conviction that, as capitalism matured, the Protestant ethic would cease to be necessary as its ideological impetus and that enchantment would wither away. Notwithstanding the universal impact of rationalization, the line between sacred and secular was never thoroughgoing, save perhaps at the level of ideology, either within European polities or beyond them. In late modern times, that line has become ever more overtly contested, ever more challenged by social and religious movements—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu alike—that often look less like modern voluntary associations and more like would-be theocracies: communities at once religious, commercial, and political, governed by divine inspiration and reformist zeal. Why should this be?

Elsewhere, John Comaroff and I have argued that the late twentieth century underwent a radical social, economic, and territorial reorganization—akin to that of the Age of Revolution of 1789–1848—which ushered in the social and political architecture of the modern world and erected the conceptual scaffolding of modern social science (Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 2000). This second age of revolution, we suggested, is witnessing another epochal shift in relations among capital, labor, and geopolitical organization. The sources of this transformation are complex, of course, linked to the ever more integrated nature of global capital, especially, finance capital; to the salience of ever more abstract, electronically mediated means of production; to the increasing commodification of culture, services, and affect; and to the rise of new kinds of accumulation vested in knowledge, franchises, brands, intellectual property, and so on. These non-proletarian modes of production have dramatically eclipsed the ideological role of labor—in its modern, industrial form—as the recognized basis of generating value, both abstract and embodied (a fact made poignantly manifest by the figure of the zombie). In addition, the sociology of primary production, reorganized as the quest for cheap, tractable labor, has eroded existing bases of industrial manufacture and globalized the division of labor, a process that has been abetted by the growing liberation of corporate enterprise from state regulation. As sites of manufacture and consumption have been dispersed across the earth—America’s working class is ever more to be found in Asia or Eastern Europe, for example—connections among these sites and populations have become fragmented and opaque, undermining the very idea of a national economy in which local interest groups recognize each other as interdependent components of a commonweal (*ibid.*).

As an upshot, the spatial articulation of politics and economy has been fundamentally disrupted, and footloose capital has renegotiated the terms of its relation to the nation-state, itself ever more corporate. Governments have had to make new kinds of accommodation with business and with translocal market forces, striking novel power-sharing partnerships with private enterprise, both local and foreign. Ruling regimes have tended to outsource key state functions, from customs and excise to prisons and warfare, rendering borders ambiguously both open (to trade, investment, and favored populations) and closed (to immigrants of less desirable quality). Under these conditions, sovereignty is often blurred or overlapping. And ever more intense, disarticulated flows of bodies, goods, and fiscal media link local units in convoluted circuits of exchange that governments are unwilling or unable to regulate. This, in turn, undermines the experience of a cohesive political or moral community, contained by the common space-time of the nation.⁸ The growth of these transnational circuits also disrupts the modern idea of ‘society,’ which has presumed the same national-territorial architecture, the same integrity of organization. The disparate horizons mapped by the rapid expansion of deregulated exchange multiply

the bases of popular belonging, calling upon people to reconsider the once axiomatic attachments to nation and community. Representation, at once semiotic and socio-political, is destabilized by these shifts. People lose trust, not merely in those who represent their interests, but also in the coinage of public communication itself—and in the face value of signs. This distrust is heightened, in many places, by the sudden, radical devaluation of key media of exchange, such as national currencies. There is a widespread perception, post-Bretton Woods, that the real worth of money is inconstant as never before, that the relation between signs and meanings is ever more slippery. The fact that the exchange rates set up by Bretton Woods were based on common consensus, rather than some absolute scale of monetary value, seems to have been beside the point. Note, in this regard, that the Tea Party movement in the US has expressed the desire to return to the gold standard, as if this might stabilize national tender and value *tout court*.⁹

Revitalized religious movements seem especially capable of finding a foothold on such unsettled terrain (Jean Comaroff 2008, 2009). This raises a key theoretical question for contemporary social analysis: Why do faith-based organizations thrive in many contexts where the architecture of modern social institutions, institutions à la Durkheim and Weber, seems to be eroding? Why are these movements so vibrant when prior forms of organization, like labor unions or more orthodox religious denominations, have weakened? Why are the solid lines between the sacred and profane, the private and public—lines that seem synonymous with liberal modernity—under attack in many places? I think here of the worldwide evidence of the rapid growth of charismatic and related ‘renewalist’ or ‘spirit-filled’ faiths, above all in the global South, where these movements are “reshaping the social, political and economic landscape”¹⁰ by engaging in mainstream politics, business, and civic life with the express aim of putting “God-in-everything,” so “anything-can-be-holy.”¹¹ At issue here, too, is a reanimated role for affect in public expressions of religious fervor, as Kamari Clarke rightly suggests in this section (see Jean Comaroff 2011, 2012). Born-again belief, I stress, is not an autonomic response to neo-liberal transformation. Revitalized teaching has often ‘run ahead’ of neo-liberalism, bearing the aspirations, the visions of a this-worldly millennium that prepare the ground for radical, market-oriented reform. This raises a historical Weberian question about the relationship between the ‘neo-Protestant ethic’—often linked to a ‘prosperity gospel’, with faith in ‘Jesus and the market’ (Kintz 1997)—and a millennial spirit of capital in our own age.

What this suggests, once again, is that we inhabit a moment that raises, if in new guise, many of the founding questions of the social sciences, questions first posed by the advent of modern society within the framework of liberal democracy, industrial capitalism, and the nation-state. Now, as older maps of socio-political space are overwritten by a global division of labor, a planetary economy, and a virtual electronic commons, how do social groups organize themselves and their processes of social and moral reproduction? What undergirds authority now that sovereign forces are blurred, undermined, displaced? What defines human worth as shifts in the nature of work and in the production of value suddenly render large sectors of the population irrelevant, incapable of self-sustenance, disposable—as they did during the rise of the modern industrial world, which bred its own army of predatory specters (Thomas 1971)? Are radically different forms of mutuality, of emancipatory politics, made possible by new communicative media? Or are the latter merely novel vehicles for long-standing social and moral processes? Are new kinds of effervescence evoked by televangelicals and cyber-congregations when messages can be e-mailed to the Wailing Wall, care of Email-God.org? Or does mystery get lost in the wiring, the graft, the infinite loops of the virtual social network?

Certainly, ours is not the spiritless age that rationalist theorists of modernization predicted. Faith, whatever we make of it, is born-again in late modern times. For Adorno (1981: 95), “phantasmagoria comes into being when, under the constraints of its own limitations, modernity’s latest

products come close to the archaic.” In one guise or another, religion remains, remaking itself as the domain in which temporal sovereignty gives way, inevitably, to an authority of a radically different kind. Destined ever to run ahead of human reason, faith exists in mutually constitutive relation with society. It is its necessary other, as it were, whether to authorize established arrangements or to wield its revelatory force, its otherworldly legitimacy, to ‘speak truth to power.’ For social scientists at least, our concern must lie precisely *in* this dialectical relationship—in the endless, reciprocal interplay of religion and society, the occult and rational utility, in the long, unfolding history of the modern world.

■ **JEAN COMAROFF** is Professor of African and African American Studies, Professor of Anthropology, and Oppenheimer Research Fellow in African Studies at Harvard University; jeancomaroff@fas.harvard.edu.

■ NOTES

1. See “God Was on Everybody’s Side: An Interview with Jean Comaroff,” inaugural interview on The Immanent Frame blog of the Social Science Research Council, 25 January 2010, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/01/25/god-was-on-everybodys-side>.
2. Ritual is itself a construct with a particular genealogy, a significant aspect of which (see, e.g., Turner 1967: 19) overlaps with that of religion in Western thought. The term has been the object of a long, unresolved debate in the social and behavioral sciences. Bloch’s reliance on its cognitive qualities as a distinct mode of communication would not satisfy those who dispute whether ritual can be adequately distinguished as a type of human interaction either within or across different cultural universes. There is also argument as to whether ritual pertains only to stylized ‘symbolic’ or ‘indexical’ communication, or would better be defined as the “communicative aspect” (Leach 1964: xiv) of all human behavior. In the latter case, the category is little different from communicative action in general.
3. I choose not to use the category of ‘Abrahamic religions’ (Asad 1993; Bloch 2008) in my work. This is not merely because the category is vastly overgeneralized or because it implies certain unwarranted commonalities among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while failing to capture significant differences. It is also confusing in the African context because its chief discriminating feature—monotheism—was often a feature, if in distinct local idiom, of indigenous cosmologies.
4. Sonnyboy Mokgadi and Moopelwa Letanke, “‘Zombie’ Back from the Dead,” *Mail* (Mafikeng), 11 June 1993, 1, 7. See also Sonnyboy Mokgadi and Moopelwa Letanke, “Zombie Missing,” *Mail* (Mafikeng), 17 December 1993, 1, 4; Joe Davidson, “Apartheid Is Over, but Other Old Evils Haunt South Africa: Witch-Burning Is on the Rise as Superstitious Villagers Sweep House of Spirits,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 June 1994, A1, A10. Mokgadi, co-author of the first two stories and many others on the topic, was killed some two years later in mysterious circumstances involving a ‘township fight’. Rumors soon spread that his violent death was due to his investigation of zombies.
5. See, for example, “Petrol Murder Denial,” *Mail* (Mafikeng), 2 June 1995, 2; Nat Molomo, “Bizarre Zombie Claim in Court,” *Mail* (Mafikeng), 31 March 1995, 2.
6. In 1995, for example, striking workers on an Eastern Transvaal coffee plantation demanded the dismissal of three supervisors who were accused of killing employees to gain control of their jobs—even worse, of keeping zombies for their private enrichment. See “Spirits Strike at Labour Relations,” *Mail & Guardian*, 27 January 1995, <http://mg.co.za/article/1995-01-27-spirits-strike-at-labour-relations>.
7. Cf. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2003). The theoretical and conceptual issues raised by the figure of the zombie and by occult economies are addressed in a series of interrelated essays (see, e.g., Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 1999a, 1999c, 2000).

8. In South Africa, as I write, the minister of arts and culture is hosting a Social Cohesion Summit, attended by political and civil society leaders from across the nation. The summit is intended to address the urgent challenges standing in the way of building a sense of common nationhood. See "President Zuma to Open Social Cohesion Summit," *SABC News*, 4 July 2012, <http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/049b4a004bd940a09509f7dcfc8ee867/President-Zuma-to-open-Social-Cohesion-Summit-20120407> (accessed 10 July 2012).
9. Alex Heigl, "Tea Party Is Actually Pushing to Make Gold the Only Legal Currency," 3 June 2011, *Nerve*, <http://www.nerve.com/news/politics/tea-party-pushing-for-a-return-to-the-gold-standard> (accessed 10 July 2012).
10. "Pentecostal Resource Page," *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, 5 October 2006, <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Pentecostal-Resource-Page.aspx> (accessed 11 July 2012).
11. Greg Newton, "Free-Market Christianity?" *Travelers: Theological Conversation for the Journey* blog, <http://travelersjournal.blogspot.com/2006/03/free-market-christianity.html> (accessed 5 May 2008).

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Religion's 'Others'

Jean Comaroff on Religion and Society

Peter Geschiere

To start with an apologetic note, it is quite a step for me to write something for a journal on religion (even if it is on religion and society). The very first lines of Jean Comaroff's vivid piece made me realize that there is a common trait to where we come from, but that our reactions have been very different. For the Netherlands as well, it is difficult to maintain that the separation of the sacred from the secular was its founding principle as a modern state. On the contrary, the two have never been clearly separated. I remember quite vividly that in the 1950s most Protestant pastors and all Catholic bishops did everything to stop their flocks from voting for the socialist party (even then a very moderately socialist one). When more and more Christians nonetheless did so, people spoke of a *doorbraak* or 'breakthrough' (conveying the image of a dyke breaking for the Dutch); this announced the gradual collapse of the pillarized organization of society. I was raised in the Protestant pillar and therefore studied at a Protestant university. Until the 1980s, candidates for a professorship had the choice either to subscribe to the university's principles (teaching and research on the basis of the Bible) or to declare themselves 'not to be against' these principles. Of course, this procedure worked like a trap, since the best person on the latter list had to be a much better candidate to have a chance of being appointed over the top person on the subscribers' list. All this made me decide never to work or write on religion. I was further fortified in this decision when, on switching from history to anthropology, I discovered that religion seemed to be *the* theme in Dutch anthropology. At the time, this was seen as a somewhat uncomfortable sign of being backward. Yet now this seems to put at least some Dutch work in an avant-garde position (see, e.g., Meyer 1999, 2009; Moors 1995; van der Veer 1994).

All this is to explain why my contribution to this debate will hardly dwell on religion (as I warned the editors). I accepted the invitation to participate since I owe so much to Jean and John Comaroff's inspiration for my own work. But this debt concerns rather what Jean—in her ironic comment on the unproductive debate about "what can, or cannot, claim to be 'religion'"—qualifies as religion's others: superstition, magic, satanic rites. What gave me a boost was especially the open and imaginative way in which the Comaroffs related—and continue to relate—these apparently retrograde (or in any case peculiar) phenomena to broader developments. As Jean summarizes this broader view in her piece: "This approach implies a vision of grounded theory in which lived practice—including self-conscious theory making itself—is always seen to exist in a dynamic relation with immediate context and with larger-scale processes of transformation."

For me, this dynamic approach—sometimes inspiring vertiginous visionary excursions, but always referring to concrete experience—was most effective in returning respectability to a topic like witchcraft. When reading the Comaroffs' (1993: xxv) introduction to their collection *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, I remember my surprise at how witchcraft emerged quite

abruptly as a key topic for further studies. At the time, I was wrestling with a book on witchcraft and politics¹ and feeling uneasy about it, as it was quite clear that this topic was not politically correct. After giving presentations, I was often reproached that speaking about witchcraft was primitivizing Africa, putting it back into the nineteenth century.² Yet I found it difficult to give up on the topic. In the field I had been struck by the dynamics of these representations and the ease with which they were grafted upon new kinds of technology and enrichment, taking on completely new forms that people saw as particularly powerful. The then still current tendency to qualify these notions as ‘traditional’ was strikingly inadequate to deal with all this ferment. The Comaroffs’ introduction suddenly made my fascination with the topic go beyond cultivating an interest in an archaic, quaint singularity. On the contrary, it turned out to be crucial for understanding people’s positioning of themselves in the modern world.

The success of the Comaroffs’ 1993 book and the approach it inspired may be well-known. Witchcraft had been for some time a topic that anthropologists tended to dodge. Thus, when in the 1980s my Cameroonian colleague Cyprian Fisiy and I looked for inspiration on how to analyze the role of these conceptions in new forms of politics or entrepreneurship, we could hardly refer to any anthropological study. But after 1993 witchcraft became the new craze in anthropological studies, especially for Africa. Indeed, in the subsequent two decades there appeared so much on the dynamics of these conceptions and practices in new contexts that it is hardly surprising that a reaction followed.

In the rest of this short text I want to address these recent criticisms of what some people dub ‘the new paradigm of witchcraft and modernity’. I think this offers a good starting point for addressing more generally the possibilities and issues raised by the Comaroffs’ vision of how anthropological topics, such as religion, should be studied in a dynamic relation with larger-scale processes of transformation. What interests me especially is to oppose this approach to the current revival in our discipline of the notion of ontology—in itself a notion with great potential, but in the hands of anthropologists always in danger of being used for evoking a culturalist vision of radical cultural contrasts. Such a version of the notion, emphasizing cultural contrasts as given, seems to fit the world order particularly badly in the present, so deeply marked as it is by hybridization and creative efforts for mixing. Exploring the differences from the Comaroffs’ visionary approach can all the better bring out the value of the latter.

The Rapid Rise and Fall of a Supposed Paradigm: Witchcraft and Modernity

As far as I know, the first to use the expression ‘a paradigm of witchcraft and modernity’ was Blair Rutherford (1999). As has now become habitual, he used the notion of paradigm to highlight certain shortcomings of the studies on this topic. For him, these were a tendency to neglect the anthropologist’s own role in ‘the politics of witchcraft’ and, more importantly, a functionalist tenor. Anthropologists working within this paradigm might criticize the classic studies for trying to understand witchcraft in its function of restoring the social order, but in Rutherford’s view the new levy of witchcraft studies has been equally functionalist in trying to reduce witchcraft to modernity. More recently, it has become almost commonplace for authors to begin by establishing their distance from this supposed paradigm—the Comaroffs serving as the first target and my book *The Modernity of Witchcraft* as a secondary one—before the author steers his or her own course. A very outspoken critic is Koen Stroeken (2010) in his study of the ‘magic of witchcraft’ among the Sukuma (Tanzania). For him, the paradigm attempts to understand the resilience of witchcraft in African settings only as an effect of modern inequalities and uncertainties, thus completely neglecting the long history of the notions involved. In their

introduction to a special issue of *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, titled *Territoires sorciers*, Christine Henry and Emmanuelle Kadya Tall (2008) are even more dismissive. According to them, these studies brought only a facile reduction of “le phénomène sorcier ... comme preuve et épreuve de la modernité [as proof and ordeal of modernity]” (ibid.: 16–17; my translation).³

Of course, one should never object to serving as a punching bag for subsequent authors if this helps academic debate to progress. This is the purpose that the ever more popular notion of paradigm now mainly seems to serve. However, I am not sure that in this case this notion is very helpful. Of course, none of the authors who are supposed to have launched this paradigm would ever claim that witchcraft in present-day African contexts would be only about modernity. All of them are conscious of—and often also worried by—the diffuse and very inclusive tenor that this concept is acquiring in everyday talk, making it indeed an all-pervasive presence.⁴ Nor would these authors ever claim that the recent dynamics of these notions are to be understood without taking into account their long and variable histories. Even if these dynamics make people evoke planes, magical airstrips, and notions of debt that easily intertwine with capitalist logics, it is clear that these haunting images have their own history that has acquired special aspects for each regional context. Conversely, it is, of course, impossible to reduce people's experiences of modern changes to just witchcraft (see Geschiere, forthcoming).⁵ Many more narratives are around, in present-day Africa as well. What these studies have in common is an interest in the ease with which people refer to witchcraft discourse when trying to make sense of modern changes.⁶ Certainly, in the 1990s it was important to highlight the impossibility of sticking to an image of witchcraft as a traditional relict that would disappear with modern changes. As noted, the dynamics of witchcraft ideas and the ease with which new technology and ideas were becoming central in people's discourse on witchcraft made the ‘modernity of witchcraft’ an urgent issue. But is this enough to speak of a paradigm?

The danger is, of course, that this paradigm notion is used to shut down discussion of ideas and freeze insights that were presented as very open ones. For me, it is surprising how easily this can apparently happen with the Comaroffs' notions of ‘occult economies’ and ‘millennial capitalism’ (see Jean's present text). For an Africanist, there may be attractive aspects to the idea that millennial capitalism does not bring increasing transparency but is instead everywhere accompanied by occult economies that further cloud its workings. This can at least serve to show that Africa, with all the excitement about hidden conspiracies of witches, is not that exceptional. Yet it is a riddle to me how anyone can deduce from this that the term refers to an “occulte universel et toujours violent [a universal occult that is always violent]” (Henry and Tall 2008: 15; my translation). The relevant texts by the Comaroffs (1999, 2000) refer to a wide range of examples that highlight precisely the different forms such occult economies can take in different contexts and in relation to different histories. What we clearly need are open terms that can do justice to the uncertainties of the late modern world on which Jean focuses toward the end of her text. It is debatable whether it is then useful to try to close notions by making them part of a supposedly rigid paradigm. For me, the interest of a notion such as occult economies is that it clearly refers not only to the present-day context of a highly adventurous and unstable capitalism, but also to hybrid constructs of highly different elements (and with highly different histories) with which people try to deal with these uncertainties.⁷ Of course, there is always a danger of mechanistic explanations (especially when critics work with simplified summaries of complex texts). This is why Jean's emphasis on ‘lived practice’, as the anchor not only of ethnography but also of theory, remains so important.

To return to witchcraft and modernity (although the same applies when analyzing religious dynamics), the starting point should always be people's own reflections. In the regions where I did fieldwork, the link with modernity is there, even in glaring forms. My Cameroonian friends

constantly complain that *la modernité* only seems to reinforce witchcraft. Why does it not disappear, they ask, as in Europe? It might be important to emphasize that this is not an academic quibble but rather a strong preoccupation in the study of societies—part of an everyday struggle with new possibilities that remain highly elusive and suggest all the more upsetting inequalities.⁸ Returning to lived practice is a guarantee that our efforts to relate to wider contexts will not lead to mechanistic explanations.

Anthropology, Continuity, and the Return of Ontology

It is striking that the Comaroffs' work—notably Jean's on religion—has also been criticized from an opposite angle as an example of a typically anthropological inclination to fall back on continuity. Joel Robbins's (2007) attack on anthropology is well-known. Starting with Melanesian examples, he denounces a current tendency among anthropologists to take the continuity of local elements as a premise and to focus on the 'domestication' of outside interventions rather than on the novelty of emerging arrangements.⁹ In her recent book on the Pentecostal 'revolution' in Nigeria, Ruth Marshall (2009: 5) similarly denounces a "paradigm of the 'domestication of modernity'" in the work of the Comaroffs and their students, who would start from "a supposedly local repertoire" that would work to "demystify modernity" (ibid.: 24–25). Marshall attacks the work of Birgit Meyer (1998, 1999) on the same grounds. Yet one can wonder who is localizing what?¹⁰ If we stick, for instance, to the zombies referred to in Jean's article in this section (they appear constantly in the Comaroffs' work since the 1990s), it is quite clear that their emergence was a new phenomenon in South Africa. In the part of East Cameroon where I did my main fieldwork, people explicitly linked the emergence of similar zombies to the development of cocoa cultivation in the central areas of the country, which attracted many laborers, some of whom chose not to return. But people saw this most explicitly as a new relation.

Marshall's plea for a strictly historical approach—in which every relation is seen as newly emergent from a specific historical situation and not as an outcome of a continuity, taken by the researcher as self-evident—is highly inspiring.¹¹ She insists that the idea of religion as a separate domain was shaped by the colonial encounter and that this applied equally to witchcraft, as religion's 'other'. This is of course not a new insight. Marshall clearly takes her inspiration here from John Peel (1968) and also from Joseph Tonda (2005). But, like Tonda, she succeeds in conveying most vividly the urgency of this conceptual shift away from any idea of a continuous African tradition by the powerful ways in which both she and Tonda relate this to the present-day realities in the parts of Africa that they study. Taking as her starting point Foucault's idea of the event as a *rapport de forces* that can always be turned around, Marshall (2009: 26) warns: "Witchcraft and Christianity are not eternal objects, but historical, rare ... there are no lines of cultural continuity in an objective or material sense; such lines are only analytical abstractions or forms of representation objectified through practices, whether practices of ethnographic inscription or real political struggles" (see also ibid.: 35). One of the admirable features of Marshall's book is that even her more abstract and theoretical passages remain so deeply grounded in her experience of the everyday life of Pentecostals in Lagos. This gives her general explorations all the more power and impact. And, indeed, Marshall's interpretation of the Foucauldian notion of event comes remarkably close to the Pentecostals' view of conversion as a crucial moment that effects a 'complete break with the past'¹²—of which Paul's dramatic experience on his way to Damascus is, of course, the archetype. For Marshall: "The [colonial] encounter was, in every sense, a situation of beginnings" (ibid.: 63).

Tonda, the Congolese sociologist already mentioned, is even more outspoken about the novelty of *la sorcellerie* in (post-)colonial contexts and is equally critical of at least some anthropologists. Tonda's (2005) *Le souverain moderne* is one of the most original and powerful books from Africa of the last few years. From it, the figure of the 'modern sovereign'—*le corps du pouvoir* (the body of power) in Congo and Gabon—emerges with haunting force. Tonda describes this somber figure as "the power that, since the colonial encounter, rules, from inside, the African masses, both the subjects and the mighty" (ibid.: book cover text; my translation, here and elsewhere). Crucial for him is that this particular *dispositif* of power does not emerge from the opposition between, on the one hand, mission, market, and state and, on the other, local ideas of occult forms of power (*l'esprit sorcellaire*). On the contrary, the modern sovereign is created by the magma-like fusion of all of this. Tonda's main target includes scholars, notably anthropologists, and others who believe in 'the Great Divide'—that is, 'African culture' as some sort of antipode to external influences like development, liberal reform, and especially *le travail de Dieu* (the missionary impact).

Tonda sees it as a complete fallacy to blame the continuing crisis in Africa on a tenacious traditional African culture—a 'pagan spirit' obsessed with witchcraft. On the contrary, for him 'the workers of God,' the politicians, the businessmen, and the consumers with their greed for Western products, are as deeply implicated, since it is precisely from the amalgam of all these elements that the fetishization of power and consumption—the very hallmark of the modern sovereign—was born (see Tonda 2002: 39, 180; 2005: 182). Only by recognizing the deep imbrications of witchcraft, missionary impact, state performance, and new forms of entrepreneurship and consumerism can we finally get rid of the tenacious opposition of tradition and modernity.

As with Marshall, the colonial encounter for Tonda (2005: 258) is an incisive occurrence that has to be taken as the starting point for understanding new beginnings. It brought a *déparenté-isation* (dissolving of kinship) of society by creating *des lieux non-lignagers*—places outside the logic of the lineage (think of the missionary posts, the administrative centers, the trading posts)—where a completely different logic 'of the camp' emerged (ibid.: 11, 77, 121). The consequence is not a disappearance of witchcraft but, on the contrary, the rapid expansion of completely novel forms of *sorcellerie*, now also 'de-parentalized'—that is, no longer linked to the lineage but tuned to wider horizons of global circuits (ibid.: 77, 213; see also Tonda 2002: 27). As Tonda (2005: 258) puts it: "Indeed, the colonial moment frees the constitutive imaginary of witchcraft ideology, since this moment undermines the ideological configuration of the lineage ... The work of the imagination that is set loose by this moment is the same that continues in our time in ever more intensified forms under the impact of globalization."¹³

Marshall and Tonda certainly show how much any idea of 'African culture' hinges upon unwarranted assumptions of continuity. Moreover, it is quite clear how incisive the colonial encounter has been in delimitating religion as a separate field and hence also in objectifying witchcraft as some sort of counter-domain.¹⁴ Yet it might also be important to point out that the colonial encounter has a history of its own: it has lasted far too long to be seen as a more or less abrupt 'moment' in time. I would rather see it—and maybe also the emergence of Tonda's modern sovereign—as a long-term 'articulation' in which different elements are combined in highly precarious and accidental ways.¹⁵ One might wonder whether Marshall's notion of event, in the traces of Foucault, is not too abrupt—maybe due to the influence of her Pentecostals and their obsession with abrupt conversion. Tonda and Marshall rightly warn against any tendency to look for an essence of witchcraft—or of religion—as some sort of given of human nature, which, since times immemorial, reproduces itself in different forms yet still remains the same unto itself. Yet seeing it as just a product of the colonial moment—however innovative that moment may have been—seems to turn history into some sort of roller coaster. Construing continuity is

not only a preoccupation of (some) anthropologists; it is often also very important to the people involved, both the dominant and the dominated.

For me, the main question is whether Marshall (and also Tonda) are not putting their criticisms in front of the wrong door—all the more so since there is a return to continuity thinking in some corners of anthropology that makes their critiques increasingly important. Over the last few years I have been working on a forthcoming book titled *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison*, trying to put African obsessions with new forms of witchcraft into a comparative perspective. Reading on various regions, I was struck by the return of notions of ontology in different corners of anthropology. A good example is Andrew Lattas's (2010) vivid study of the current outpouring of so-called cargo cults in Melanesian contexts. These cults are centered on millenarian dreams of untold riches that are confiscated by the whites but will ultimately become available for the Melanesians. Precisely because of the vividness with which Lattas highlights the fascinating dynamics of these cults and the sometimes fantastic hybridizations of local and foreign elements in their imaginary, it came to me as a surprise that he analyzes them in terms of a "cultural ontology" (ibid.: 49).

Clearly, I should not have been surprised since apparently ontology is becoming a new buzzword in the discipline and beyond. This is most promising, if the inspiration comes from innovative and challenging versions of this notion as in the works of Deleuze and Latour, who both emphasize ontology as multiple and contingent. However, as previously stated, many anthropologists still seem to be plagued by a persistent tendency to use the concept in a closed sense for evoking supposedly radical contrasts—'ontological differences'—between cultures or regions. Such culturalist tendencies are, for instance, very present in the challenging and highly sophisticated reflections of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Strongly influenced by Deleuze and also by Latour, Viveiros de Castro is lately attracting much attention in British anthropology and also in France. In his *Métaphysiques cannibales*, Viveiros de Castro (2009: chap. 1) makes an urgent plea for the need to denaturalize the ontology that shapes Western academia. Anthropology should be much more open, even in its theorizing, to 'native thinking'. This is an important and welcome project (although less new than Viveiros de Castro seems to think). However, it is quite surprising how quickly this boils down in his book to outlining dyadic contrasts between an Amazonian ontology and academic thinking—"deux schèmes ontologiques 'croisés' [two ontological schemes that 'intersect']" (ibid.: 49; my translation). Of course, the former turns out to be in every respect the opposite of the latter. In contrast to his earlier work that emphasized the historicity of Amazonian societies (Viveiros de Castro 1996), including in the pre-Columbus era, Viveiros de Castro's (2009) sketch of *la métaphysique de la prédation* marking all Amazonian societies seems to be a given, outside history. It is also striking that he now allows for clear correspondences in this respect between Amazonian and Melanesian ontologies—both, of course, in radical opposition to the West. Such simplistic oppositions seem to become ever less valuable in a world that is marked by the creative hybridization of very different elements, leading to constantly new and unexpected experiments. Indeed, there may be some truth in the polemical title "Ontology Is Just Another Word for Culture" of Venkatesan's (2010) report on a Manchester debate—even if it seems to go against the ontological tide in British anthropology.

Of course, much more remains to be said about the possibilities of notions of ontology as multiple and contingent in the discipline of anthropology. I only mention the tenacious trend in our discipline to use the concept in a culturalist sense in order to highlight the great value of an approach as outlined in Jean's text. For me, the continuing efforts of the Comaroffs to start from lived practice and analyze it in a dynamic relation with immediate context and larger-scale processes of transformation is a reassuring antidote against powerful culturalist and ahistorical tendencies that continue to plague the discipline.

■ **PETER GESCHIERE** is a Professor of African Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and co-editor of the journal *Ethnography*. Since 1971 he has undertaken historical-anthropological fieldwork in various parts of Cameroon and elsewhere in West Africa. His publications include *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (1997) and *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (2009). His book *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* is forthcoming with the University of Chicago Press; p.l.geschiere@uva.nl.

■ NOTES

1. This book, *Sorcellerie et politique en Afrique: La viande des autres* (1995), was published later as a lengthier work titled *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (1997).
2. Interestingly, those comments mainly came from Europeans and Americans or from Africans in diaspora. In Africa itself, people are much more eager to discuss the topic.
3. For more subtly formulated reservations, see Bernault (2009), Ceriana Mayneri (2010), and Sanders (2003).
4. See also Sanders's (2003: 338) balanced formulation: "African witchcraft may well be part of modernity, but by no means needs to be *about* modernity."
5. Cf. also Palmié (2002: 338n2), who warns me against "the overextension of an ethnographic concept [i.e., witchcraft] ... as the descriptor of an allegedly 'global(izing)' condition." All this on the basis of my simple observation that certain aspects of witchcraft discourse make it a tempting way for people to address the riddles of modern developments (see Geschiere 1997, 2011). Overextensions seem to be everywhere in this whole debate.
6. See also Siegel's (2006) challenging analysis of a sudden eruption of witch-hunts in East Java in 1998 (just after the fall of Suharto) in terms of confrontations with 'the uncanny'. In this particular case, it was clearly related to a sudden collapse of the modern state. Yet Siegel sees the uncanny as omnipresent and of all times.
7. In this sense, the concept relates very well to Anna Tsing's (2005) magisterial analysis of the haphazard and highly fragmented character of capitalist interventions in a local setting such as Kalimantan.
8. Cf. the Comaroffs' surprise on returning to South Africa at the end of apartheid and unexpectedly encountering people's preoccupation with zombies, as described in Jean's text.
9. Robbins's (2007) critiques of studies on the anthropology of religion in Melanesia are quite convincing. But one can wonder whether it is wise to target an entire discipline. Is it, for instance, possible to maintain that such continuity thinking was also a constant in economic anthropology?
10. Marshall (2009: 25) herself adds that the "Comaroffs' work also shows that today's figures of occult practice and religious discourse are not atavisms from the distant past." But she continues: "Nonetheless, smuggled into some of these analyses is a tacit understanding that perpetuates the relation of exteriority between Western and African modernities," and she adds references to van Binsbergen and Devisch. A problem is that these two authors' works are of a very different signature than that of the Comaroffs. It seems that Marshall is spanning her net too wide here, attacking quite indiscriminately a whole discipline rather than addressing her critique, in itself certainly valuable, to studies for which it is relevant. For instance, one can wonder whether Meyer's (1999) study on Ghanaian Pentecostals, *Translating the Devil*, can be cited as an example of continuity/domestication thinking. Meyer's emphasis on translating as producing new meaning is in line with Marshall's approach.
11. A fine example of how to historicize witchcraft can be found in Ceriana Mayneri's (2010) account of his research in the Central African Republic. His reconstruction details how—through a series of misunderstandings between missionaries, administrators, and interpreters—the notion of *sorcellerie* was grafted onto local concepts and then generally appropriated.
12. Based on a common Pentecostal slogan, this phrase is the title of one of Meyer's (1998) influential articles on the upsurge of Pentecostalism in Ghana.

13. Cf. also Tonda (2002: 237): “la recomposition de la sorcellerie ... en la sortant des limites anthropologiques du pensable et possible [the recomposition of witchcraft ... that goes beyond the anthropological limits of what is thinkable and possible].” Cf. also Florence Bernault (2006, 2009).
14. It might be useful to emphasize that in other parts of Africa the much earlier encounter with Islam had already brought an idea of religion. But then, Tonda focuses especially on western equatorial Africa, wisely avoiding any strict geographical delimitations for his explorations.
15. Cf. Tonda (2005: 264) where he quotes with approval the Comaroffs’ idea of ‘a long conversation.’ The notion of articulation comes, of course, from the old Marxist debate on an ‘articulation of modes of production’ that was marred by the heaviness of the mode of production concept. However, it did show the possibilities of the articulation notion for historically following uncertainties and variety in the grafting of capitalism upon pre-existing forms of production and exploitation (see, notably, Rey 1973).

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Thoughts on Jean Comaroff's Political Economy of Zombies

Kamari M. Clarke

Jean Comaroff is in a rare and prolific class of scholars. She straddles the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with broad-reaching and intellectually significant contributions to the way we understand some of the most profound changes of our time. Drawing from a childhood in apartheid-era South Africa among liberal Jewish refugees from the Holocaust, and then coming of age in a climate suffused with related discrimination and suspicion, Jean opens her comments by narrating the profound impact that experience had on her intellectual life. With related experiences in African liberation struggles and socialist movements in a context where evangelical revivalism and Pan-Africanism were at large, she explores how she has come to see human categories as shaped by specific meanings and forms of signification. At the core of her message is an attempt to make sense of the role of religion alongside the political economy of markets and empires. Her argument—that contemporary capitalist political economy is the explanation for the emergence of zombie religious formations in South Africa—is useful for understanding the ways that religion, as a social category, is made real. For, as she shows, it is not just genealogy that determines the epistemological basis of human knowledge. Rather, lived practice is “always seen to exist in a dynamic relation with immediate context and with larger-scale processes of transformation.” And in that regard, Jean questions how those practices constitute social worlds that not only are understood as real but also are contradictory, paradoxical, and emancipatory (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004a, 2004b).

Although this approach offers a productive tension for making sense of the complexities of religion as lived, with a Weberian attempt to merge political economy with culture and a Durkheimian conceptualization of religion as productive of contemporary social realities, Jean insists on an analytic that highlights the genealogical making of religion while also taking on religion as an a priori category (Asad 1993). Herein lies the robustness of her argument: that religion exists in society but its profound manifestations work alongside power to remake itself in a range of ways. While she accepts a particular ontology within which to situate religion and society, she does so within a particular dialectic that addresses the limits of a genealogical understanding of religion. Thus, religion is a product of social consciousness (or social facts) (Durkheim [1912] 2001), which is closely aligned with the materiality of the everyday. As she suggests, through her departure from Weber, new forms of capitalist rationality have ended the expression of rationalist belief. Instead, what we are seeing is religion remaking itself.

The key for Jean is to disaggregate faith from religion and to show how it is mutually constitutive with society. In relation to society, she is interested in how religion is a product of contests over sovereignty and authority; through those struggles its worldviews are established and legitimized and its truth produced. Jean's commitment to this duality in defining religion is not surprising, given her lifelong commitment to dialectical thinking and complexity. What

is surprising is her suggestion that capitalist political economy/capitalist anxiety is the central answer to the question, Why zombies, why now?

While capitalist anxieties are part of the answer, there are other elements that are subsumed that need particular consideration. How else might the political economy of capitalism explain the rise of the manifestation of zombies? Thinking about the multiple trajectories for making sense of capitalism as part of a complex set of social encounters is especially critical because of Jean's commitment to society and complexity. In furthering a hypothesis that capitalist rationality has ended the expression of rationalist belief, it also seems important to consider these religiosities against the backdrop of something like atheism and what the competing discourses are. Thus, to complete the argument that particular religious manifestations that take the form of witchcraft or zombies are fundamentally tied to capitalist anxieties and the erosion of particular forms of rationality, I suggest that we also think about the other belief forms that are on the rise and consider the role of the state and its institutions and of global organizations in arbitrating the continued conflict between religion and society.

At a time when talk about religiosity (Pentecostalism, Islam, occult practices) is on the rise, there are also findings that atheism is increasing. A survey of 51,927 people collected by the WIN-Gallup International network in 57 countries reported a drop in religiosity around the world: 59 percent of the respondents claimed religious beliefs, a decline of 9 percent since 2005. Interestingly, the country exhibiting the largest drop in religiosity was Vietnam, while Ireland placed second for the most significant decrease. The number of Irish who consider themselves religious had fallen by 22 percent in 2011, down from 69 percent in 2005. The staunchest atheists were found in Japan (31 percent), the Czech Republic (30 percent), and France (29 percent). The countries where most people self-identified as religious were Ghana (96 percent), Nigeria (93 percent), and Macedonia (90 percent).¹ The reasons for the decline are widespread, ranging from Catholic disenchantment as a result of sexual abuse accusations to increases in educational opportunities in the North, resulting in greater access to alternative theories of human existence. The trend is clear, however: in the North there is a profound decline in religious fortitude, while in the South and more impoverished communities, or in sites where religious politics are heightened, there are greater claims of religiosity.

This survey is important in highlighting that there must be a variety of causal explanations for increases and decreases in new religious beliefs. It is clear that the 'survival' of religiosity is not uncontested in those places where new religious formations have arisen or where claims to religious freedom are either under attack or being curtailed. And while Jean makes clear that in post-apartheid South Africa the promise of freedom and equality came with a range of new realities, one of them being the reality of defendants whose lawyers "argued that their clients had been driven to murder by the zombification of their kin," in many of the court cases related to religious questions that I have observed and tracked, we see that boundaries are being increasingly tested and that there is an ongoing contestation to maintain the rationality of the state. An excellent example of this is the struggle over religious rights that is taking place at various court levels. When stakeholders vie for the right to wear religious garb at work or school, or insist on using the Bible in public education, they are calling on certain forms of rationality to expand religious freedoms (also see Feldman 2005; Sullivan 2005). Through arbitration over the limits of state accommodations, they are reinforcing particular, rational legal principles and articulating the meaning of religion and its allowances.

One arena for examining this growing rationality is the struggle to establish universal notions of rights. In particular, it is not just human rights but animal rights that are becoming battlefields of religious practice: over the past 30 years, the notion of rights has been extended to include animals. In other words, the boundaries for the permissibility of lives to be protected are

increasingly being extended beyond human beings. Recent examples include limitations on animal ritual sacrifice among Orisa/Santeria practitioners, the successful outlawing of bull fighting, banning the sale of *foie gras* (certain types of animal liver) in the state of California, and fighting to save the lives of African elephants (hunted for tusks) and seals (hunted for meat and fur). In these campaigns, the concept of human rights has gone beyond the human individual and has been extended to a universalist principle that is endorsed by international institutions. The fight for the terrain over the application of universal rationality is as much a site of contestation as is the arena of religiosity. For just when it seems that religiosity is spreading as a result of capitalist disenchantment, so too is atheism, based on a range of other convictions that are producing new imprints for social action. I want to call attention to the processes at play and the actors and institutions that are engaged in these sites of struggle. What interests me here are how these zombie stories have come about and the stakes involved, as well as the affective experiences that provide the impetus for narrativizing zombie stories.

Jean's answer to the question, why do people tell stories about zombies? is that it is because of their anxieties about joblessness in the midst of visible economic growth in South Africa. The presumption here is that new forms of capitalist rationality have emerged alongside new religious 'guises' and that the social realities with which people contend—the disappearance of work, ostentatious capital accumulation, and the impact of policies of capitalist liberalization—are increasingly connecting long-standing conceptions of witchcraft to the new zombie phenomena. These religious manifestations are far from Weber's ([1930] 1992) prediction of increasing rationality. They provide one of the key terrains around which religious and secular logics are playing out. Religious and secular rationalities are a key site of contestation.

It is also important to ask how people experience joblessness. Jean's interest in the modernity of religion has helped us to connect the dots and make sense of how knowledge forms work and how these forms resemble people's life-worlds. What has become increasingly interesting to me about these new religious phenomena is how the advent of social forms such as zombies, or increasing forms of police surveillance and infiltration, are opening up spaces to think about affective dimensions that shape these new realities and the contestations engaged through them. In this regard, I find that the emotional responses that shape zombie accusations are fundamentally subsumed within Jean's larger concern with the political economy of witchcraft and zombie making. In other words, the affective experiences that shape the many contours of South African sociality fall out of focus when the political economy of religion becomes the main way we make sense of these highly affective social worlds. Thus, if we also ask, why does this idea about the zombie become charismatic? the inquiry moves us in a different direction where political economy becomes one of many points of entry.

Although there may be a causal relationship between the materiality of everyday life and the development of religious ideology, the structures of fear and anxieties that shape the narrativization of zombies in South Africa are more than meta-narratives about modernity. Along with the recent rise of the language of zombies among the Tswana-speaking people of the northwestern region of South Africa, what is fascinating is the way that affective effervescence is understood to exist alongside familiar cultural practices. The structures of feelings that shape the responses to zombie threats connect not just to presumptions that occult practices are corollaries of new capitalist phenomena, but also to deep fears, anxieties, obligations, and anger related to an array of unknown forces—human or otherwise. The emotions that zombies conjure may range from anxiety, paranoia, or anger and may lead to human dispossession, but they also index a different temporality of personhood that requires belief in the afterlife and what Aisha Beliso-De Jesus (2012) refers to as an understanding of ancestral co-presences. So what, then, are we to make of the affective responses to these realities? How might structures of poverty and changing forms

of work serve as scaffolding for making sense of the affective faith experiences that shape the many contours of South African sociality?

The development of the new field of religion and emotion has only recently emerged in the social sciences as a response to the recognition that emotions and their histories of social meanings play a role in the life of individuals and society (Barreto 2010; Bertolino 2010; Davies 2010; Ridler 2010). In anthropology, studies of affect can be traced back to Raymond Williams (1983: 281), who argued that since the fourteenth century, sentiment has existed in English to denote “physical feeling, and feelings of one’s own.” Today, it brings together private, interior, individual emotions and ‘public sentiment’ as part of a larger set of political meanings that have been harder to make sense of, but that are central to the ways that affective structures work to shape the public imagination (Massumi 1995). In this case, the public imagination is indeed the site for understanding the affective management of both economic and political change. But it is also a space of contestation over the classification, appropriateness, and transformation of religious practice. The complexity of those encounters—and those who are involved in them—is as important as the existence of the encounter itself. Thus, explaining the experience of the religious encounter is as important as explaining the political and economic factors that contribute to it.

■ **KAMARI M. CLARKE** is a Professor of Anthropology at Yale University and Chairperson of the Council on African Studies. She teaches courses related to religion, law, and social theory and conducts research in West Africa and North America, in international courts, and among African religious revivalists; kamari.clarke@yale.edu.

■ NOTES

1. “Religiosity in Decline, Atheism on Rise,” OnIslam, <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/global/458486-religiosity-in-decline-atheism-on-rise.html>.

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Religion, Society, and the Everyday

Adeline Masquelier

Of all the lessons I learned as a graduate student under Jean Comaroff's nurturing mentorship, perhaps the most important one was that rather than confining my study of religion to the domain of the sacred and the formal enactment of highly charged symbolic performances, I should also venture into the humbler domain of the everyday to document the role of mundane practices and ordinary objects in the constitution of moral communities and spiritual selfhoods. It is a lesson I took to heart after I arrived in Niger in 1988 to conduct doctoral research on *bori* spirit possession. Tucked in my luggage was my worn-out copy of *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (Comaroff 1985). During my 18 months of fieldwork, Comaroff's path-breaking historical ethnography of Zionist churches in apartheid South Africa provided much-needed clarity and inspiration, helping me identify the creative, at times subversive, but always practical potentialities of *bori* for an entrenched religious minority threatened by Muslim hegemony (Masquelier 2001). Like the Tshidi of the South Africa-Botswana borderland, whose contestation of political power and social inequality found shape in ritualized practice, sartorial syncretism, and poetic language, the *bori* devotees among whom I worked resisted the ascendancy of Islam through the medium of symbolic activity and the enactment of minor acts of defiance. Just as Zionist churches in the age of apartheid harnessed the potency of colonial symbols, routinely redeploying them as "subversive *bricolages*" (Comaroff 1985: 198) within and against a dominant power, so *bori* practices—some pertaining to the realm of the everyday, others anchored in ritual performance—became sites of both parody and protest, which bore witness to the transformations wrought by colonialism, Islamization, and commerce.

Needless to say, *Body of Power* is much more than an ethnographically situated history of African resistance on the periphery of the industrial world. One of its key arguments is that mission Christianity in southern Africa provided both the scaffolding for the colonial project of proletarianization and the tools deployed by disempowered Africans to reverse the logic of industrial capitalism and resist oppression. Comaroff's brave and imaginative foray into the contradictory legacies of colonial evangelism paved the way for the study of other populist and religious movements in the global South, whose millennial aspirations have similarly fed on European counter-orthodoxies. It has emboldened a whole generation of scholars to think critically about the relationship between history and ritual, consciousness and embodiment, and ideology and lived practice—and ultimately about the role of religion in the making of modernity. Reflecting on the theoretical significance of *Body of Power* some 20 years after its publication, Shipley (2010: 479) rightfully notes that the landmark study was a powerful demonstration that culture "is not the language of tradition, but rather a highly reflexive mode of discourse" through whose reproduction and contestation "modernity itself can be negotiated." Here Comaroff's Durkheimian understanding of ritual as an inherently pragmatic endeavor is enlivened by the way she draws on Weber's work on social change and historical contingency. I should also add that by convincingly

documenting how the discourse of Zionist counterculture “stretched far beyond the domain of ritual itself, penetrating acutely into the experiential fabric of everyday life” (Comaroff 1985: 11), *Body of Power* has in fact compelled us to rethink the place of religion in society.

As I reflect on Comaroff’s remarkable contribution to the anthropology of religion, let me single out her critical intervention in scholarly debates on the colonial encounter because it enables us to dwell on the consistency of her approach to religion—an approach that is solidly grounded in the classical social theories of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber. As an individual author or in tandem with John Comaroff, with whom she has built an extraordinary intellectual partnership, Jean Comaroff has pioneered a brand of historical anthropology whose mission is to illuminate the contours of wide-scale processes of social transformation through the lens of the local and the ordinary. Whether she explores the workings of colonial evangelism in nineteenth-century Tswana communities or what later emerged out of it—in the image of Zion, for instance—she does so through a detour into the everyday. With a nod to de Certeau (1984), Elias (1982), Goffman (1959), and Lefebvre (1971)—who have variously urged us to consider dimensions of life that generally go unremarked because they are deemed unremarkable—she locates the ethos of a whole society in its practices of bodily adornment, its architectural aesthetics, its patterns of production and consumption.

In volume 2 of *Of Revelation and Revolution*, the third book she co-authored with John Comaroff, the colonial encounter is thus characterized as “an epic of the ordinary” (John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff 1997: 35) unfolding against the backdrop of a broader social dynamics. By treating the everyday as “a properly proportioned part of the workings of society and history” (ibid.: 31), the Comaroffs draw our attention to the fact that for the British Nonconformist evangelists who brought Christianity to Southern Tswana people—and, by implication, for other colonists on other colonial frontiers—civilizing the heathens involved a “quest to refurbish the mundane” (ibid.: 9). In much of their writings on the colonial encounter, evangelism in this corner of Africa is described as less “a theological crusade than . . . an effort to reform the ordinary” (Comaroff 1996: 19). Despite the fair share of criticisms they have elicited, the Comaroffs’ early as well as more recent efforts to demystify religion and “[put] it to work in the everyday world” (Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 1993: xvi; see also Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff 1999) have inspired numerous scholars, including myself, to focus on the worldly rather than the ‘holy’ dimension of religious phenomena.

Granted, the notion that the realm of the sacred intersects with (and may even be indistinguishable from) the world of the everyday is far from novel. Seventy years ago, Evans-Pritchard ([1937] 1976) insisted that witchcraft was such a ubiquitous part of Azande life that scarcely a day went by without reference being made to it. Today it has become commonplace to speak of the banality of spirits, zombies, ancestors, and fetishes and to stress that it is all a question “not of the fantastic but of the routine” (Olivier de Sardan 1992: 11). Stressing the everydayness of religion by tracing its embeddedness in the mundane does not imply that quotidian acts and ordinary experiences can be dismissed as meaningless or as transparent, however. As Jean Comaroff has beautifully shown in the southern African context, it is by dissecting dress codes and domestic patterns, built forms, bodily disciplines, and regimes of temporality and property that one can glimpse the contours of not just material worlds but moral orders as well. In something as banal as the cut of a woman’s dress (or the shape of a house), one can discern the imprint of Christian discipline and Victorian rationality, suggesting that if the Protestant mission did not always produce converts in the conventional sense of the term, it nevertheless penetrated deep into the seams and folds of the Tswana social fabric.

No doubt the Nonconformist evangelists who set out to save Tswana souls by reforming indigenous lifeways had grasped the centrality of cloth and other consumer goods for “making

visible the categories of culture” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 59), and this is partly why, as Comaroff insists, they themselves played such a critical role as the vanguard of colonial capitalism. Summoning Marx (1967), who understood well how the most trivial stuff can acquire an almost magical character, Comaroff tracks the social life of ordinary objects—church uniforms, clocks, coins, and so on—demonstrating that such life makes little sense outside of the wider spiritual order of things and vice versa. In so doing, she only hints at the way that Marx’s understanding of fetishism as the “religion of sensuous desire” (Marx and Engels in Pietz 1993: 136) can illuminate how human passion (i.e., the simultaneous urge to possess and the experience of being possessed) “emerges within a material dialectic between human sensory routines and material objects” (Pels 1998: 101). In the end, Comaroff is more interested in what is produced out of the wider dialectic between religion and society. Note that this interest is informed by a Weberian insistence on the specificity of historical circumstance. Thus, when Comaroff examines the relation between Protestantism and say, capitalism, it is in the context of particular historical circumstances and with an eye to the particular configurations it produces.

Drawing from anthropology and history, Jean Comaroff has carved out a critical analytical space from which she provides glimpses of the reciprocal interplay of African and European lifeworlds and the ongoing permutations arising out of the “structure of the conjuncture” (Sahlins 1981: 35). Her small-scale analyses of how indigenous conceptions of value, personhood, power, and productivity were radically transformed following the missionaries’ arrival instantiate the logic of much larger social transformations. Through careful descriptions of how local mission work, with its struggles and its successes, routinely unfolded and how such work subsequently spawned new practices and new persons, it is also the vaster project of European colonialism—that is, the expansion of not just Christian culture but industrial capitalism—that is afforded visibility. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in missionaries’ efforts to dress African people, since clothes “bore with them the threads of a macroeconomy” and were an effective means of inserting indigenous people in the British consumer market (Comaroff 1996: 36).

Whether she muses about Zionist rituals or zombies, the Protestant ethos or millennial capitalism, Jean Comaroff ultimately compels us to address one of the important issues of our era, namely, the place of religion as the “necessary other” (as she puts it in this section) in the late modern world. Resolutely eschewing predictions of the impending demise of religion as well as affirmations of its irrelevance as an analytical category (Bloch 2005, 2010), yet mindful that its very definition is the outcome of a particular history of knowledge and power (Asad 1993), Comaroff writes with great passion and sensitivity about the historical entanglements of religion and society out of which the modern world—including Africa—emerged. As an individual author and in partnership with John Comaroff, she has probed the complexities and practicalities of religious engagements beyond the domain of the divine or the supernatural to show how religion remains enduringly rooted in social configurations that it helps sustain, replenish, and revise. Through her forceful demonstrations of the historical (as well as contemporary) significance of faith in the making of modernity, she has revitalized the anthropological study of religion, offering us renewed analytical purchase for a critical appreciation of the ‘religious’ as part of the warp and weft of modern society.

■ **ADELINE MASQUELIER** is a Professor and Chair in the Department of Anthropology at Tulane University. She has written on a range of topics, including spirit possession, Islam and Muslim identity, and youth. She is the author of *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger* (2001) and *Women and Islamic Revival in a West African Town* (2009). She is also the editor of *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface* (2005). She won the 2010 Herskovits Award for best scholarly book on Africa, and in 2012 she received the Aidoo-Snyder Prize for best scholarly book about African women; amasquel@tulane.edu.

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