Religious Dimensions of Conflict and Peace in Neoliberal Africa
An Introduction

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It is difficult to imagine a place where religion’s ambivalent power (Appleby 2000) has been more profoundly experienced than in Africa. In colonial Africa, for example, Christianity often bolstered, sustained, and legitimated the violent process of governance. But more recently, movements that draw their authority from “other-worldly” rather than “this-worldly” sources have mobilized African publics against corrupt and abusive temporal regimes and facilitated innovative new forms of reconciliation and cooperation. This essay, and the volume it introduces, illustrates the power of religion in making and unmaking social and political orders in Africa. The authors represent diverse disciplines and backgrounds, but certain themes unite them, and in turn hold the volume together. The first is a shared emphasis on the socially and politically transformative power of religion, and its capacity to foster conflict and peace simultaneously. The second is that, in making sense of the relationship between religion and conflict, each essay dwells on the actual and ideal status of religion vis-à-vis the state and other secular institutions in Africa. And so, taken together, the essays question, in different ways, the relevance of the separation of the sacred from the secular, as well as the very categories themselves, in specific African contexts. This approach is prescient because the separation of religion from politics is often held to be a prerequisite for modern democratic societies, but this very separation conceals the fact that secular values are as predicated on belief as religious ones (Asad 2003). The distinction of the secular
from the sacred also undergirds temporal authority by implying that state violence is more reasonable and legitimate than its religious counterpart, an always dubious position that African history has rendered absurd. Finally, the essays in this volume respond—some directly and some implicitly—to the fact that the relationship between religious and secular categories and institutions is undergoing a profound shift in a neoliberal Africa gutted by structural adjustment programs (SAPs), as states become increasingly incapable of governing their territories and as religious groups take on many of the functions formerly reserved for states.

For post-Enlightenment secularists, the relationship between religion and politics has always been fairly straightforward: religion, because it is based on particularistic faith, is inherently non-rational and parochial, and its intrusion into politics is thus suspect at best; however, it is widely held that, because religion is grounded in morality, it is also uniquely capable of “speaking truth to temporal power” (Comaroff 2003), and so serves as a moral foundation for civil society (see Asad 2003 for an overview). For most secularists, then, religion is an essentially ambivalent force that must be controlled by more legitimate secular power, to which religious actors must ultimately submit in the interest of democracy. This position is often defended through a particular reading of European history. Religious sentiment has, according to this view, contributed to senseless and irrational death and violence, especially in the dreadful medieval and early modern past, and so the modern, democratic secular state evolved to protect people from the violent excesses of other people’s faith. Religion, in this widely held view, is vestigial—a stubbornly resilient, potentially dangerous trace of an earlier time whose social function in modern times is held to be the satisfaction of basic human needs that modern, secular societies neglect or repress, such as the need for meaning or social connection.

All of this has little to do with African understandings of or historical experiences with religion and politics. For one, most African religious thought and practice is not focused on the transcendent, but is explicitly concerned with the reinvigoration and expansion of social relationships in the present (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004). For example, the idea that ancestors influence events in the present is widespread in
much of Africa, even among professed Christians, and can clearly be interpreted as a religious belief; however, the whole point about the ancestors is that they live among and impact the lives of the living, and that they want to be shown affection by being included in everyday human activities, like eating, drinking, and participating directly in political life. Moreover, modernist assumptions about how religion and politics should relate to one another, if at all—including the idea that religion may be inimical to modern political life—have little relevance to African experiences of state politics or religion, as certain religions (especially Christianity) have long been seen, by Europeans in Africa and Africans alike, as synonymous with modernity and progress.

In addition, the pairing of the categories “religion” and “conflict” implies a normative social order, or peace, that is secular and presumably state-centered. Conflict, cast as a pathology, acquires meaning in relationship to peace, a supposedly normative condition, but to what actual social-political condition does the term peace refer? Recent social theory has made the violent conceptual and operational foundations of states, and of secular law, abundantly clear (see, for example, Agamben 1998). The inherent violence of law and the state makes normative understandings of the concept of “peace,” which are usually synonymous with nation-state sovereignty and legal convention, seem naïve and misguided. Contemporary events have borne out the fact that peace is itself a fraught concept that often conceals the violence upon which apparent peace depends. It is interesting, in this regard, that, since the suicide bombings of 9/11 and the subsequent (2003) U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, the terms empire and imperialism have reemerged in popular and academic discourse after a long hiatus, fueling the popularity of books such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire, and feeding discussion about the true reasons for and consequences of Iraq’s so-called liberation. In this context, it has become common for scholars to connect peace with domination and to point out, as Partha Chatterjee has put it, that “the first and most important function of empire is to maintain the peace” (Chatterjee 2004, 98). Thus, in the context of real-world imperial politics, the imposition of peace exacerbates discontent and violence.
which, as everyone watching the news is all too aware, is often articulated in a religious idiom (see, for example, Juergensmeyer 2008; Lincoln 2003).

Africans have been very much aware of the relationship between empire and putative peace since the beginning of colonialism. Colonial rule, one of the most violent and transformative episodes of Africa’s shared history, was rhetorically framed, by its proponents, as a peace-building project: an effort to forge a universalizing hegemony over what was imagined to be the chaotically pluralistic violence of African life. One of the primary stated reasons for missionization and administrative colonialism was the protection of Africans from themselves: from their own inherent violence, from their absence of reason, and from their childlike inability to distinguish truth from falsehood (see, for example, Mamdani 1996). This underpinned the religious and secular dimensions of the colonial project, including the artificial imposition of the colonial boundaries that would later become the material and imaginative pretexts for postcolonial national sovereignty and peace.

Thus Africans experienced colonial and postcolonial nation-states as violent and coercive intrusions into preexisting, dynamic social and political orders, and not as reasonable institutions that promised the alleviation of pain and the promulgation of peace through the attenuation of religious unreason. Therefore, we should be wary of projecting onto Africa the liberal Western notion that the state is a reasonable artifice designed to replace irrational conflict and war with peace and happiness. Moreover, in many parts of the continent, Christianity fostered and legitimated class formation in Africa; conversion came to be synonymous with the acquisition of modernity and its fruits (such as schooling and formal employment), while non-Christian beliefs and practices came to be associated, for many, with backwardness and poverty. African cultural and ritual practices were at first stigmatized by missionaries, and later were coupled by real political, geographic, and economic marginalization, which shaped the way these vernacular activities, and the people who practiced them, were perceived. Schooling, which was usually predicated on conversion to Christianity, promised an avenue of escape from the restrictions created by colonial policies of indirect governance, customary law, and apartheid.

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rules regulating labor migration to urban centers, and so cemented the equation of certain religions, such as Christianity, with modernity and progress.

Given the relationships among religion, governance, and the making of African elites in colonial Africa, it is not surprising that most popular anti-colonial movements channeled the power of religion, often in ways that transgressed upon established secular and religious powers simultaneously. Typically, these new, popular religious movements attempted to either (1) appropriate potent aspects of colonial orders while making them more amenable to African conditions (for example, syncretic “break-away” schools and churches) or (2) completely transform political arenas by creating new, religiously inspired realities that never existed before, but which drew on earlier cultural and historical symbolic resources—such as millenarian movements, neo-traditionalist movements, Islamic brotherhoods, and, in a somewhat different vein, certain “born-again” forms of Christianity seeking a break with the past. For example, in Kenya, defense of female genital-cutting, banned by the Christian missions and government in 1929, was the issue that initially popularized and empowered the first anti-colonial political association, the Kikuyu Central Association, which launched the career of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president, who went on to write a full-scale ethnography defending the practice. The new African independent schools and churches that formed, at first in response to the ban, were able, over time, to collapse and transcend the powerful oppositions that had been central to colonial rule—most important, the divide separating African things from European things.

Other anti-colonial movements focused specifically on mobilizing the power of the past in opposition to abusive authorities. In Zimbabwe during the 1960s and 1970s, traditional spirit mediums, in constant dialogue with ancestors, led the Shona guerilla war against the colonial regime, and greatly enlarged the scale of the anti-colonial resistance (Lan 1985). And throughout the continent, new religious movements have challenged colonial and postcolonial regimes, deploying ritual and magic to unite large groups of people, while simultaneously offering an alternative, often millennialist, vision that runs counter to the state (Hackett 2010; Comaroff 2001). Examples of
socially marginalized groups mobilizing cultural resources to resist and reinvent oppressive social orders are too numerous to detail, but include the Tanzanian Maji Maji rebellion of the 1910s, the eastern Congolese Simba secessionist rebellion of the mid-1960s, and Alice Lakwena’s Acholi insurrection against Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni’s government in the 1980s. Throughout colonial and postcolonial Africa, armed insurgencies drew on culturally and historically entrenched idioms, framing them in an innovative way in an effort to generate new, inclusive social and political orders.

Postcolonial African regimes seeking to consolidate their control over territories that were nation-states in name only sought, like their colonial predecessors, to manage religion and religious differences as part of the political project of nation-building. In many new nations, educated Christian elites, many of whom had acquired prestige and position as colonial functionaries within colonial systems, monopolized the avenues to and symbols of success in the postcolonial period. Supported by mainline church leaders, in many postcolonies politicians and educated civilian leaders used the entrenched belief that African life and culture was synonymous with “witchcraft and savagery” to cajole populations to leave “traditional” cultural and religious practices behind in the interest of national development. But this was certainly not the only variation on the theme of religious politics, as others sought to ground the state in more authentically African cultural repertoires: for example, in 1960s Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko banned Christian baptism and names, while Africanizing dress and criminalizing the tie as part of his attempt to forge an outwardly egalitarian national culture with himself at its center. In 1970s Mozambique, FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), the anti-colonial guerilla insurgency-turned Marxist-Leninist government, tried to make its influence felt in regions where it was unknown and its motivations suspect by taking dramatic measures against Christian church leaders and “traditional” ritual and religious authorities alike (Lubkemann 2008). In response to the demonization of African culture by colonial and postcolonial authorities, and in an effort to create a truly decolonized African sensibility, many African intellectuals and cultural leaders have long tried to resurrect African religious concepts and practices by making them look more like their direct competitors,
especially Christianity. For example, they have resorted to the politics of capital letters and acronyms in order to make African religions resemble something like a church, while sanitizing and homogenizing what were, in actuality, incredibly diverse cultural practices (and so these diverse beliefs and practices are now called, in African academic circles, “African Traditional Religion” or the even more official and organized sounding acronymic “ATR”).

In short, throughout the continent, arguments about what counts as religious and irreligious continue to be linked to now thoroughly Africanized ideas about modernity, progress, and the ideal foundations of political community. These debates erupt in emerging public spheres, and largely define public debate about a range of issues. For example, I once watched an African Pentecostal preacher in Nairobi try to demonstrate, through elaborate interpretations involving numerology, that condoms were part of a satanic conspiracy spearheaded by whites, in consort with African elites, to kill off the poor and appropriate the land of the deceased. An irate and well-dressed African businessman responded to him, and the growing crowd, with the provocative question, “But how can the whites be devils, since they are the ones who brought light to a dark continent?!” And, for a conference on religion, conflict, and peace-building in Africa held in Uganda, I was part of a panel on African neo-traditionalist political movements, including the Congolese Mai Mai and the Kenyan Mun-giki. After the presentations concluded, a sizable group of African religious leaders stood up and vocally complained, “That is not religion!” These social movements, they argued, were the violent work of the devil, who seeks to turn society backward by playing on the immature passions of the poor.

In the post–Cold War era, the imposition of neoliberal economic policies has further blurred, and at times inverted, whatever boundary can be said to have existed between religion and formal politics in Africa. During the 1980s and 1990s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF)– and World Bank–mandated deregulation of African economies led to currency devaluation, slashed public services, the erosion of political patronage, and, ironically, increased corruption. As a result, governance has become progressively more fragmentary and multiple, and in many places no single political entity exercises the
right to kill, while religiously inspired movements excise taxes and impose levies; as Achille Mbembe has put it,

Many African states can no longer claim a monopoly on violence and on the means of coercion within their territory. Nor can they claim a monopoly on territorial boundaries. Coercion itself has become a market commodity. Military manpower is bought and sold on a market in which the identity of suppliers and purchasers means almost nothing. Urban militias, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security firms, and state armies all claim the right to exercise violence or to kill. Neighboring states or rebel movements lease armies to poor states. . . . Increasingly, the vast majority of armies are composed of citizen soldiers, child soldiers, and privateers. (Mbembe 2003, 32)

In this structurally maladjusted Africa, religious organizations have taken on many state functions, from holding court to controlling media to, in some instances, delivering the mail. At the same time, state regimes have drawn on religious sources to bolster their authority, calling on citizens to reclaim sacred land and establishing official commissions to investigate alleged cases of devil worship among itinerant, underemployed youth. And so states have become more like religious organizations at the same time as religions have come to look more like states. And all of the diverse political players competing for legitimacy and power have drawn on—and will no doubt continue to draw on—religious narratives, symbols, and concepts to establish and extend their authority. In this context of waning state power and legitimacy, repressed political and religious identities have erupted again, in novel guises, giving birth to a torrent of cultural revivalist movements and new religious movements that dwell on memories of violent pasts that postcolonial regimes have tried, unsuccessfully, to banish to the dustbins of history.

While the influence of religion may be growing, the expansion and privatization of media has deterritorialized religion, and reduced complex problems to potent religious signs and symbols (see, for example, Hackett, this volume). This is a crucial, relatively recent phenomenon that has not yet been subject to the critical attention it de-
serves. Media have contributed directly to the popularity and scale of religious movements, and have shaped the way publics understand them—the urban Mungiki movement in Kenya (see Wamue, this volume) and the state’s violent reaction to it, for example, has been a media-promoted national spectacle, which would never have reached its present scale had it not been nurtured and sensationalized by Kenyan newspapers and television. Internationally, too, the media have drawn attention to the outwardly religious dimensions of African conflicts, while obscuring the more subtle historical factors that precipitated specific conflicts. For example, the conflict in Darfur has been widely portrayed, in the international media, as a religiously inspired Arab Muslim genocide against Africans, but this position ignores the fact that there are Muslims on both sides of the conflict, and that the events in the western Sudan have a complex array of historical and contemporary causes, including the impact of global warming on the ecology of the region and the related competition among pastoralists for dwindling water resources. Another example is the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda, which has been portrayed as an irrational religious genocide against the Acholi people. However, Acholi are just as likely to blame the secular Ugandan government for their situation as they are the LRA, and many commentators have argued that the international community’s complicity in the secular, anti-LRA narrative has helped extend the Ugandan government’s control over the region, causing much anxiety and resentment among Acholi (Ayesha Nibbe and Adrian Yen, personal communications).

We can derive a few closing points from this admittedly broad and somewhat generalizing history, before moving on to our contribution, and our contributors. First, religion in Africa was never relegated, even superficially, to a space outside politics and current events, or to benign places of private worship. Rather, because of the history of religion and religious transformation in Africa, religion has always been perceived, by Africans, as having the power to radically change social life and history, and religious practitioners have employed religious symbolism and enthusiasm in their efforts to totally reinvent social orders in opposition to that which came before. So it comes as no real surprise that, today in Africa, religion emerges everywhere, in
places that Westerners are perhaps not accustomed to finding it (al-though, these days, they should be). And this should not be taken as evidence of either African backwardness or failure to separate naturally given categories (such as the public and the private or the sacred and the secular) which are, in fact, historically and culturally particular. Moreover, because of this transformative capacity, religion has always been both conflict-making and peace-making. Also, because of the historical struggles discussed above, African religious thought and practice has always had to confront the consequences of conflict-ridden histories, and is always struggling to transform the present by engaging in some way with the past—either by drawing on its power and channeling it into efficacious directions or by ritually destroying the past’s power over the present. Religious values and practices thus express, but can also not be reduced to, larger social issues—pertaining to class, generation, gender, ethnicity, and the like—and so become a prism for accessing and overcoming historical and structural conflict and violence. Finally, because other African power brokers, such as militias and state institutions, are often illegitimate in the eyes of the public, the normative Western idea that religious actors should obey secular laws and institutions, or that there is a fundamental difference between these spheres of thought and action, is not immediately obvi-ous, especially to Africans themselves.

As a result of these issues we, as thinkers interested in Africa’s history and future, have to be prepared to pose difficult questions that have rarely, if ever, been seriously posed before (see also Mbembe 2001). For example, is it possible that an “extremist” religion that is manifestly uncivil, to the point of disregarding national law, breaking away from the nation-state, or condemning nonmembers as being beyond the pale of moral order, may actually influence people’s habits, expectations, and dispositions in positive ways that cannot yet be foreseen? Might it be that the violence of religious groups or organiza-
tions is directly proportional to the scale and severity of the historically given structures they are trying to transform? And might religiously inspired conflict be part of the longer historical process through which Africans create political communities with which they actually identify, and confront unequal and authoritarian political structures that are equally embedded in religious histories? This vol-

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In selecting chapters for this volume, we chose pieces that take counterintuitive and original approaches to the complex imbrications of religion, conflict, and peace in neoliberal Africa. Most of the chapters are historical and ethnographic in method and scale, and focus on the everyday activities, processes, and structures that engender conflict and peace: liturgical verse, movies and street pamphlets, church services, secret societies, legal debates surrounding domestic arrangements, and so on. In this way, these chapters pull focus away from dramatic and highly mediated violent conflicts by examining the role of religious practices in the making and unmaking of social orders from the bottom up, in stark contrast to conventional top-down approaches.

The first section of three, “Historical Sources of Religious Conflict and Peace,” examines how aspects of African history have laid the foundation for very divergent models of peace: one stressing reconciliation and cooperation between formerly opposed parties, and another relying on the ongoing perpetuation of conflict and the persistent demonization of others, especially the poor or marginal. In “Forgiveness with Consequences: Scriptures, Qenet, and Traditions of Restorative Justice in Nineteenth-Century Ethiopia,” historian Charles Schaefer delineates a tradition of restorative justice in Ethiopia that extends back to the medieval period, elements of which can be found in Ethiopian political thought and practice in the twenty-first century. Schaefer argues that Ethiopian restorative justice has allowed for the forgiveness of vanquished parties, but that forgiveness has always come with consequences; this “conditional clemency” has implied that the “one seeking forgiveness [was] obligated to show contrition and to be accountable for future actions; in other words, to correct their criminal . . . ways.” Schaefer argues that this understanding of justice has enabled post-conflict peace and reconciliation at various moments in Ethiopian history. Moreover, and crucially, this tradition of justice drew its legitimacy, and was arguably derived...
from, the religious thought of Coptic Christianity and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, epitomized by the sophisticated qene tradition of liturgical poetry. But, more recently, Western-derived notions of retributive justice have been both adopted by and foisted onto the Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes with often devastating consequences. Schaefer argues eloquently for the need for both foreign diplomats and national political leaders to take seriously the lessons of Ethiopian restorative justice, a religious and cultural tradition that remains a central part of Ethiopian life and thought.

Schaefer’s chapter dwells at length on the peaceful potential of religion and religious discourse, and argues that these aspects of religious belief and practice should be developed so that religion can contribute effectively to peace-building. In contrast, in his chapter, entitled “Making Peace with the Devil: The Political Life of Devil Worship Rumors in Kenya,” James Howard Smith focuses on the productive dimensions of the concept of evil, epitomized by the idea of the devil; he argues that specific, culturally nuanced ideas about the devil and devil worshipers have been central to governance in Kenya from the colonial period, and that diverse Kenyan groups have tried to use these concepts to “make peace” by destroying that which threatens their vision of social order. Smith shows how, in Kenya, the idea that the devil exists on the existential limits of rational governance, and that those frustrated and marginalized by the colonial project are tempted to serve him, came to inform colonial and postcolonial state governance, as well as popular resistance. During the 1950s Mau Mau insurgency, state officials, abetted by anthropologists and psychologists, elaborated and acted upon an idea of devil worship that portrayed an underground satanic society divided into cells, predicated upon ghastly oathing rituals, and led by a diabolical and “de-tribalized” native leader. This theory shaped the way the colonial state handled Mau Mau (through the use of witchdoctors and the mass detention of the Kikuyu population, for example) and later contributed to postcolonial state policies on allegedly subversive groups and populations.

Smith traces how, over time, this discourse about devil worship was deployed by different groups in Kenyan society (those critical of the Moi regime, the Moi regime itself, the Mungiki neo-traditionalist
movement, etc.) that sought to shore up threatened moral and political boundaries and forge viable national communities predicated on shared moral values. The essay makes it abundantly clear that contemporary conflicts rooted in current conditions are understood and acted upon through the prism of traumatic historical memories and historically entrenched structural conflicts. Moreover, the discourse of devil worship has established a tense peace through the radical, violent Othering of those whose existence has been held to threaten the peace. Thus, Smith’s chapter dwells on the unseemly aspects of peace—the fact that real-world peace often involves scapegoating and the perpetuation of tension (in this case, framed in a religious idiom; see also Ring 2006).

The following three chapters comprise a section entitled “New Religious Movements, Enduring Social Tensions”; these chapters foreground the present, but emphasize how contested historical memories shape the way Africans experience and respond to the structural transformations associated with neoliberalism. In these memories, which have indeed flashed up in a moment of intense danger (paraphrasing Benjamin 1968, 267), an invented history is alternately sacralized and demonized by differentially positioned social groups, becoming fodder for a religious imagination that deploys invented traditions to admonish the present. Grace Nyatugah Wamue-Ngare, in “The Mungiki Movement: A Source of Religio-Political Conflict in Kenya,” examines a Gikuyu neo-traditionalist religious and political movement whose members and leadership have struggled to retain their original utopian religious foundations at the same time as the organization has morphed into a powerful shadow state and mafia. Mungiki’s membership consists mainly of poor young men who have, in the past, sought to impose a strict gendered and generational orthodoxy upon the Kikuyu public, blaming the spread of HIV/AIDS on the waning of cliterodectomy, and even going so far as to attack “indecently” dressed women on Nairobi’s streets. Urban Mungiki activists are known by what are, in the predominantly Christian region of central Kenya, highly transgressive and symbolically loaded stylistic acts: donning dreadlocks in the style of 1950s Mau Mau insurgents, praying to the Gikuyu God Ngai while facing Mount Kenya, and snorting snuff tobacco, a historically stigmatized practice associated
with senior males in rural areas. In doing so, Mungiki embody and act on their belief that Kenyan society and the state have lost their grounding in what Mungiki gloss as traditional African values.

Although Kenyans often criticize Mungiki for being anachronistically obsessed with the past, Mungiki leaders have spoken publicly, to the media, on issues of current national concern, including the need for land tenure reform and the destructive consequences of IMF-mandated SAPs. Because of their public, exaggerated performance of a violent and repressed history (mainly, the legacy of the Mau Mau insurgency), the group struck a profound chord in Kenyan society, provoking a great deal of discussion and, ultimately, violent repression from the Moi and Kibaki regimes. But over time, with the help of the media’s quest for spectacle, Mungiki has become a sign unleashed from the original intentions that gave birth to it, as idle young men are arrested by police under suspicion of being Mungiki and as others commit crimes of their own only to later blame them on an increasingly spectral Mungiki (see also Smith, this volume). While she recognizes that Mungiki is no longer a singular entity, and that there are now indeed many “Mungikis” at work in Kenyan society, Wamue chooses to focus on an aspect of the Mungiki phenomenon that has been systematically ignored by the Kenyan media, and by most Kenyans: mainly, the positive moral vision that has sustained and motivated many Mungiki despite the fact that these utopian hopes have been consistently corrupted by politicians and unscrupulous entrepreneurs seeking to perpetuate violent conflict. These utopian imaginations entail a model of peace that has always included the potential for violence against those who threaten Mungiki’s pristine and impossible vision of the past.

Wamue emphasizes the religious dimensions of Mungiki in reaction to those who have portrayed the movement as a mafia organization with no redeeming moral virtues. In contrast, Koen Vlassenroot, in his chapter on Mai Mai militias in the eastern Congo ("Magic as Identity Maker: Conflict and Militia Formation in Eastern Congo"), minimizes the occult dimensions of a similar, equally heterogeneous, youth-based movement in the eastern Congo in an effort to draw out their often unrecognized political and sociological motivations and historical underpinnings. Media representations
of Mai Mai militias have made them internationally famous for their transgressive deployment of traditional religious ritual, their occasional acts of cannibalism, and the youth of their leadership. But Vlassenroot maintains that, in the wake of a collapsed and defunct Zairean state, religious ritual has enabled militias to forge alternative sovereign orders, in the process blurring the distinction between peace-building and conflict-making. He convincingly argues that Mai Mai militias have struggled to violently overhaul local life from the bottom up, and that this total transformation of society has been oriented toward the remaking of historically entrenched local authority structures—this in contrast to analyses of Mai Mai that have portrayed the movement as solely an autochthonous reaction to foreign, Rwandan occupation. In their efforts to determine whether these neo-traditionalist movements are predominantly religious or predominantly political, Wamue and Vlassenroot draw attention to an even more fundamental issue: mainly, that the new religious movements at work in Africa challenge entrenched Western understandings of religion as belief in a transcendental truth above and beyond political realities. Rather, these religious/political movements are firmly grounded in real-world struggles and transformations, and are the principal mechanism through which people try to bend overarching structures to their wills.

Isabel Mukonyora confronts this issue directly in her chapter, “Religion, Politics, and Gender in Zimbabwe: The Masowe Apostles and Chimurenga Religion.” She examines a religious movement that has taken on many social functions (including those formerly reserved for states), while in some ways echoing Zimbabwean state ideology about the sacral power of stolen lands. Mukonyora begins by showing how, in the context of a declining patronage state and the attendant devaluation of men’s labor and social position, political leaders like President Robert Mugabe have drawn on the concept of the sacred power of ancestors and ancestral land to bolster their diminished position. They have thus based their political legitimacy on a vanquished model of masculine authority that real life has made all too chimerical. But Mukonyora’s analysis of the Masowe Apostolic Church makes it abundantly clear that local debates about the value of men’s and women’s work and natures are played out in the public
sphere constituted by the church, with members of each sex performing a particular, divergent model of moral authority. While the author clearly sympathizes with women’s inchoate vision of a society united by horizontal networks over and against men’s aggressive posturing, what emerges in the analysis is that the church has become a space for ritually negotiating and resolving endemic, historically enduring social conflicts that originate in the home itself. The political-economic withdrawal and declining legitimacy of the state has enabled domestic politics to become public politics at the same time as the state increasingly draws on the embattled ideal of the patriarchal household to extend its authority. Moreover, Mukonyora’s analysis demonstrates a profound ambivalence about tradition among Masowe Apostles: while they incorporate many elements of Shona culture into their rituals, and emphasize the symbolic significance of land, Masowe religious ritual is ultimately aimed at curtailng the power of ancestors, and hence the past, over living populations in the present (and thus shares much in common with other popular religious movements, such as Pentecostalism). Like the Mai Mai and Mungiki youth—though in a way fundamentally less violent than either of them—the Masowe Apostles strive to effect a total transformation of the world from the bottom up by changing and disciplining people’s attitudes and behavior. All of this work is made more profound by the fact that it takes place in a social and political context defined by the violent price of abusive masculine authorities in the larger Zimbabwean political arena.

While our second section emphasized how religion engenders new forms of social and political identification in the wake of state transformation and, in many instances, decline and collapse, the chapters in the third section (“New Religious Public Spheres and the Crisis of Regulation”) highlight the conflict between state structures and the new ideologies and institutions associated with neoliberal globalization (international religious nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], new forms of media, and discourses of human rights, for example). In this vein, Rosalind I. J. Hackett, in “‘Devil Bustin’ Satellites’: How Media Liberalization in Africa Generates Intolerance and Conflict,” argues that, contrary to all expectations that a liberalized print and electronic media would engender peaceful, open public dis-
Discussion and dialogue among religions, the recent proliferation of new media images (pamphlets, radio broadcasts, television, and the Internet) is in fact “replicating, if not intensifying, old, as well as generating new, forms of religious conflict.” Drawing on a wealth of primary and secondary sources, Hackett homes in on a single aspect of neoliberal rupture, explaining the consequences of the fact that large media organizations, once owned and controlled by states, are now “owned by private entrepreneurs, religious organizations, political parties, existing media houses, development organizations, and local communities.” In an overarching context of social and political fragmentation, media have become a mechanism for producing new forms of social belonging, often through the demonization of others. Rather than suggest that religious media determine behavior or lead to violence, Hackett draws attention to the fallacies of the post-Enlightenment assumption that unfettered communication necessarily generates the social good in a peaceful manner. Rather, she argues, media are integral, even essential, to the production of the new religiously inspired political communities that are emerging throughout the continent. This deterritorialization of religion has changed the nature of religious belief and belonging, as meaningful religious images and sentiments commonly transcend historically enduring boundaries of religious cleavage, providing new opportunities for conflict and understanding.

In his chapter, “Mediating Armageddon: Popular Christian Video Films as a Source of Conflict in Nigeria,” Asonzeh F.-K. Ukah examines the popular and legal controversy surrounding the release of the Nigerian Pentecostal film Rapture. His chapter expands upon the themes that Hackett introduced by examining a single example of antagonistic religious imagery made possible by a newly liberalized media. Ukah argues that, in the bankrupt, criminalized, and structurally maladjusted Nigerian postcolony, video film and new religious movements (especially Pentecostalism, the fastest growing religious movement in Africa) have erupted, phoenix-like, from the ashes, each fueling the other. Together they comprise a new moral and commercial economy that challenges the state, as well as established dynamics of religious growth and identification. Ukah holds that this dynamic growth, when combined with general economic and state collapse,
has the potential to exacerbate violent conflict and national fragmentation. The analysis centers on a provocative and symbolically rich film in which Pentecostals are raptured into heaven, while a thinly veiled Catholic Church spearheads the apocalypse and the subsequent, terrorizing reign of the Beast over all misguided humanity. The film generated a great deal of controversy, though no violence, in Nigeria, and Ukah focuses at length on the legal issues surrounding the film’s release. Interestingly, the on-the-ground debate assumed a form that would be very familiar to a Western, and especially U.S. American, audience (highlighting the conflict between freedom of religious expression and respect for the beliefs of others) and demonstrated a certain legal meticulousness among a wide swath of the Nigerian public. But ultimately these legal debates, and the public censure of *Rapture*’s producer, turned out to be of little consequence because the state could not effectively regulate video films. And so, ironically, the state’s banning of the film seems to have actually fueled its popularity and exacerbated its influence—no doubt confirming, for many, the truth of its message.

Ukah writes as an interested and involved student of Nigeria, clearly concerned about the rise of unyielding religious activism in a nation historically known for a religious tolerance born of manifest diversity. He is also committed to a particular vision of social order, in which the state is the legitimate legal authority and religious groups monitor their statements and images with a view to maintaining national peace. But his analysis draws attention to the existence of an alternative model of peace whose epistemological foundations are neither provable nor disprovable, and whose power over the public’s imagination is incontestable: mainly, the widely held evangelical and, by extension, Pentecostal notion that genuine peace can only emerge if all citizens transform the state of their souls by establishing a direct relationship with Christ/God (becoming “saved,” or “born again”). In this view, pluralism and relativism, rather than being synonymous with peace, are productive of social decay and violence, and the problem of national security (a more limited and secular version of peace) is of secondary importance to those who are trying to forge a new world and a whole new dispensation, or way of being human. Moreover, all manifestations of tradition are reinterpreted as demonic by
this religious perspective that seeks nothing less than what Birgit Meyer, in a somewhat more positive discussion of Pentecostalism, has referred to as a complete “break with the past” (Meyer 1998). While it may be that this religion is driven, in large part, by the desire for profits and, as Ukah puts it, “market share,” its leaders can only succeed commercially to the extent that they speak to the public’s desire to shore up moral boundaries in the wake of widespread social and economic crisis, which is in turn interpreted in moral terms.

Ukah’s chapter reveals an attitude toward the state that is as widespread among African citizens as it is among Westerners: mainly, the belief that, regardless of what the representatives of any specific state actually do, the ideal-typical state is supposed to function according to impartial and universalizing legal codes that are removed from private interests and personal emotions. This legal-bureaucratic state system, it is widely held, should be grounded in universal reason, and therefore be above the fray of religions and religious conflicts, which are held to be manifestations of particular beliefs. But the Ugandan literary scholar Abasi Kiyimba’s chapter on the fraught history of the Ugandan Domestic Relations Bill (“‘The Domestic Relations Bill’ and Inter-Religious Conflict in Uganda: A Muslim Reading of Personal Law and Religious Pluralism in a Postcolonial Society”) suggests a more complex relationship between the state and religion in contemporary Africa. Kiyimba shows how a proposed bill designed to legislate domestic arrangements (most controversially, by criminalizing polygamy) has been promulgated by Ugandan legislators and other educated elites. These self-professed modernists, supported by a wide cross-section of the non-Muslim population, view polygamy as backward and perceive its current protection under the law as a byproduct of the limiting, divisive colonial policy of indirect rule (by which so-called “natives” were governed by “traditional authorities” and “customary law”). In contrast, Uganda’s rather large Muslim population, both male and female, claims the right to organize domestic relationships as they see fit, and in turn argue that Qur’anic authority is greater than secular authority.

While this seems to be a classic case of a modern, universalizing secular state in opposition to heterogeneous religious traditions, Kiyimba’s analysis makes it clear that both positions in the Domestic
Relations Bill debate are equally contemporary. Each position emerges from opposed sides of the paradox that was the colonial state, whose bifurcated political system envisioned Africans as both citizen and subject (Mamdani 1996); the colonial regime codified Islamic self-governance in customary law, which was separated from general law. In addition, this state, far from being a paragon of secular authority, is actually shaped by religious histories, a fact that Ugandan Muslims are quick to grasp. These critics of the bill argue that putatively secular authority is actually Christian authority in a secular guise, as the bill that pretends to encode universal values actually upholds prejudices that are decidedly particular and no more modern than polygamy (again, because both legal systems trace their origins to colonial governance and law). The Muslim perspective makes all the more sense, in the context of Ugandan history, because Christianity, schooling, and career success have been indissoluble in colonial and postcolonial Uganda, as Uganda’s governing and civil service elites have long been mission-educated Christians. Thus, while many Ugandans rationally frame the state and religion as separate, religion is deeply cemented in state governance. And so the state’s regulation of religious heterogeneity suddenly takes on a completely different pallor: the state is always already a religious actor, just as religion has been imbricated in state governance from the inception of the colonial state apparatus. Conflict emerges from the structural contradictions of the postcolonial state, whose sovereignty would seem to be a precondition for peace.

And so a number of more specific issues, or themes, emerge from these pieces. The first is that the declining moral and political authority of states in neoliberal Africa has precipitated an eruption of repressed conflicts, memories, and alternative models of social-political order. These repressed imaginaries have come to appear sacred to many, in part because of the violence and energy that have been invested in their repression. This is evident in neo-traditional revivalist movements in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zimbabwe; in Ethiopian debates about repressed traditions of restorative justice; in the progressive politicization of Islam in Uganda; and in widespread reactions to patriarchal and gerontocratic authority from youth and women at all levels of the social hierarchy—from
Religious Dimensions of Conflict and Peace in Neoliberal Africa

households to state houses. This revalorization of repressed traditions and values is related to the second theme, which is the growing chasm separating the rich from the poor in neoliberal Africa. This widening divide is often understood and articulated in religious terms, as evidenced by the Mungiki in Kenya, the Masowe Apostles in Zimbabwe, and the Mai Mai militias in eastern Congo who have mobilized, in part, against the expropriation of Congolese resources by outsiders and people they imagine to be outsiders. This religious conflict reflects the fact that inequality and poverty are widely understood, by Africans, to be serious moral problems that must be redressed through religious and spiritual means (Ferguson 2006). This connects to a third theme, which is the religiously inspired reaction, in Africa, to “market fundamentalism,” or the foreign-imposed belief—no less mystical because it is secular—that the market unfettered will magically generate the social good. This is evidenced, for example, in Kenyan rumors concerning an international conspiracy of devil worshipers at the IMF; and finds its way into public debates about the potentially violent consequences of religious profiteering in neoliberal Nigeria. Writing in the midst of a global economic meltdown, African religious insights into the violence and injustice of neoliberal reforms seem all the more prescient.

A fourth theme is the fact that the transformations taking place in Africa are understood and acted upon from within historically enduring idioms of gender and generation; this is exemplified by the Masowe Apostles’ reaction to patriarchal politics; the youthful Mai Mai’s and Mungiki’s embrace of masculine values in opposition to the perceived empowerment of women; and the debate over the Domestic Relations Bill in Uganda. The downsizing of historically male-controlled formal economies and the growth of youth militias are widely understood in terms of gender and generation, and thus represent the culmination, in larger social arenas, of conflicts rooted in the household and in kinship. Religious arenas in turn become spaces for articulating and negotiating the changing statuses of men and women, and of youth and seniors, with respect to one another, especially given the absence of viable spaces for political dialogue in many parts of the continent. This politicization of kinship is related to a fifth, disconcerting trend, which is the tendency of these religiously inspired
attempts to transform social and political orders to be meted out on the bodies of women, who are widely identified with a morally vulnerable nation in contrast to a state marked as male; we see this particularly in the case of eastern Congolese militias and Mungiki youth gangs, and in the pornographic imagery deployed by Pentecostal filmmakers in Nigeria to shore up moral boundaries, while developing a consumer base in a competitive commercial environment. And finally, there is a sixth theme, which is the growing significance of electronic media and mass-mediated images and texts in African political and religious life; this has significantly altered the scope and reach of religious movements, allowing them to constitute new publics and to challenge the hegemony of secular values and institutions, as evidenced by the public debate, in Nigeria, over the Pentecostal film *Rapture*, and in the rapid proliferation and privatization of media organizations throughout the continent outlined by Hackett.

In conclusion, it is our hope that readers of this volume will emerge from it with a new appreciation of the specificity of African social and political contexts, which resist conventional Western typologies and conceptualizations, notably with respect to the sacred and the secular, conflict and peace, and religion and politics. Notwithstanding the particularities of these contexts, the insights to be found here concerning the perduring power of religion have comparative value for those interested in the imbrications of religion, conflict, and peace in diverse regions of the world.

**Note**

1. I have in mind here the multiparty democracy movements that swept Africa in the early 1990s and religiously inspired interventions such as the post-apartheid South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

**References**


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