African Sociological Review, 9, (2), 2005, pp.243-255.

BOOK REVIEWS

Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press. 2001.

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Ellis and Ter Haar waste no time in alerting their readers to their claims: to understand the dynamics of African politics first seek to understand the religious ideas and experience of the people of Africa, and: look to the interaction between religious ideas and politics in Africa for a better understanding of changes taking place in the wider world. Politics and religion have never been separate issues in Africa (nor often, elsewhere) simply because African life has never lived separate from spiritual matters. With at times captivating enthusiasm Ellis and Ter Haar ('the authors') have produced a well-researched account of the fusion of the spiritual and the social, and especially spiritual and political, that shapes Africa and her peoples. But more than this, they have recognised that to understand religion in Africa it is not enough to subject the religious practice of the people of Africa to the Western sociological gaze: as panoptic as such as gaze may be, it fails to hear the voices of Africa.

Truth is partial in that no one individual or group possesses it entirely. Knowledge comes from facts and experiences, but since our facts and experiences are inevitably limited, our truths are never total. No one of us is ever objective enough because no one of us can ever see, hear, taste, smell, or touch enough. If we wish to secure a truth greater than our own, we must converse with people whose experiences are different than our own. The truth, says Donna Haraway, emerges through 'shared conversations in epistemology' (1991, p. 101). The time Descartes spent meditating would have been better spent conversing with the largest number and widest cross-section of people possible. No one can attain the truth herself or himself. To achieve objective knowledge, we need each other (Tong 1997: p.157 - 158).

One of the key contributions of this text to the sociological study of religion lies in the authors' epistemological approach to the study through the ideas of the people, rather than the typical sociological approach focussed on structures and systems. One intriguing source for their study has been recognition of the oral traditions of Africa through the use of rumour to facilitate their epistemological access to African ways of faith, for it is often in the discourse of

rumour that peoples ways of knowing come to the fore. The novel perspectives the authors bring are well rooted in established anthropological and sociological theory of Weber, the Comaroffs, Foucault, Geertz, Giddens, and from African philiosophy and religion, Mbiti.

From their definition of religion ('a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is the home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world' – 2001, p.14), the authors place their study firmly in Africa. Traditional Western understandings of religion simply cannot accommodate African perspectives; they colonise and confine the ideas of Africa into the paradigms of the West (2001:181). To understand religion in Africa requires that we look to African ideas of religion and not simply to the institutions of religion. In ways echoed by the ontological perspective of social realism in the West (Archer 2000) many Africans view reality as stratified. The African perspective acknowledges that beneath the empirical world lies the spiritual world, with the former emergent from the latter. This relationship between the visible and invisible world is what connects religion and politics in Africa, for influence over the spiritual world (and control over communication with that world) 'can become a matter of the greatest political importance' (Ellis & Te Haar 2001:15). The authors remind us that we need to recognise that 'politics' extends beyond the social institutions into the underlying social structure emerging out of the relations between human agents: '…politics is seen as the debates and activities relating to the distribution of resources in society in the largest sense' (Ellis & Te Haar 2001:20). It is in using such broader understandings the authors succeed in giving their readers access to the 'shared conversations in epistemology' of religion, life and everything heard in the streets and through radio trottoir (literally, 'radio shopping mall'). Through these shared conversations both religion and politics in real-world late modern Africa appear in an evocative manner.

One of the insights that emerges, related directly to the role of radio trottoir (and the electronic original) concerns the complex relationship between politics and religion that is revealed – tragically – in the way HIV/AIDS is understood and responded to in Africa. In an oral society, dependant upon radio (in both its literal and social form), the rather obvious assertion that foreign aid, and foreign AIDS, sound the same becomes a matter of causality with very real implications (Ellis & Te Haar 2001:46). Added to African understandings of causality rooted in spiritual concerns which ask the question 'why' rather than the Western 'how', and against the background of centuries of colonial exploitation, and HIV/AIDS becomes a direct consequence – malicious or accidental – of relationships with the West. In African understanding HIV/AIDS, as it was briefly in the West (and still is in many religious contexts) is a moral issue in its origins, and thus must be treated with religious technologies.

Religion, argue the authors, has been the generally preferred 'technique' for managing change in Africa (2001:163) through the use of spiritual resources. They acknowledge that religion has not been, and is not perfect in managing these resources. Religion in Africa has in some cases been used to support regimes of evil (Maboto Sese Seko) as much as it for social good. They argue that where 'a bloody colonial history has left particularly acute traumas' (for example the Democratic Republic of the Congo) religion is no longer able to perform one of its important African functions – the exorcising of the 'spirits of the dead' – and this failure leaves people ill-equipped to create theories of change (2001:185). In many cases traditional religion has been left so decimated, or so corrupted, that it has lost its influence, and concern has grown for a lack of moral centre and a loss of connection between the spirit world and the material world. As a result new forms of religion ('entrepreneurs') have begun to emerge that lack the social roots of those they replace (2001:190). Once again, the emergence of religion in these spaces of moral uncertainty is not always viewed as good by people outside a specific context (the conflict around shari'a in northern Nigeria for example).

Despite these failures and weaknesses of religion in Africa, the authors argue that religious revival is present in Africa, emergent from the loss of moral centre. Like it or not, believe in it or not, religion and politics are securely intertwined in Africa, and as Africans continue to spread in a new African Diaspora, so the connections between the spiritual and material worlds will become real in other parts of the world.

This work makes a valuable contribution to understanding what we make of religion as a social practice in Africa. It also has salience for those who seek to understand African politics, from village to national levels. Although at times focusing strongly on the central regions of African, the authors have managed to include rich examples from Egypt to South Africa, and have done so in a way which is refreshing, accessible and frequently surprising.

Archer, M. (2000). Being Human. The Problem of Agency, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tong, R. (1997), 'Feminist Perspectives on Empathy as an Epistemic Skill and Caring as a Moral Virtue', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 18 (3), 153-168.

Toby Shelley, *Oil: Politics, Poverty and the Planet*, London, Zed Books. 2005.

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Readers of Toby Shelley's *Oil: Politics, Poverty and the Planet* will be easily reminded of Anthony Sampson's *The Seven Sisters*. Like Sampson, Shelley brings into his work a strong journalistic background marked by years of observing and analysing the socio-economic and political dimensions of petroleum exploitation. Shelley's urbane prose demystifies the ensemble of geology, mining machines, economics and accounting – the petroleum industry's classic view of itself – making the inner workings of petro-capitalism intelligible to the lay reader.

The major difference with Sampson's *Seven Sisters* (and this is not to belittle the unparalleled investigative depth for which Sampson's works are known) is that Shelley does not dwell on the history of the oil industry and the ruthless tactics with which the oil oligopoly (Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Total and the like) influence politics and policies in Third World oil-producing countries. Shelley's main focus is on the role of oil in the deepening of social impoverishment across the world and on the spread of wars, cross-border socio-political tensions, economic wastefulness and brigandage. He places at the centre of much contemporary global conflict the politics associated with petroleum exploitation. He sees, for instance, the 'politico-military storm' in the Middle East and Central Asia as inseparable from the two regions' vast oil and gas reserves. Even more provocatively, he suggests that '[r]ight-wing lobbyists would not be championing an assertion of US hegemony in West Africa were it not for the uncovering of that region's deep-water oil and natural gas since the 1990s', (p.2).

The book touches on just about everything oil has done to the world and its sensibilities. Chapter Two – the most comprehensive of the book's five chapters (excluding the Conclusion) – details, among other things, the 'bitter harvests' that oil-dependent economies like Venezuela, Nigeria, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar, have reaped from 'sowing the oil'. These range from the inability to 'convert oil revenues into sustainable economic growth', and declines in per capita incomes since the mid-1970s, to overall economic contraction (especially in major oil exporting countries like Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirate). Economic declines in these countries, the book notes, have occurred across periods of oil price booms and slumps, persisted in a world where oil demands continue to grow, and tended to worsen despite promises by national politicians that oil revenues would stimulate

economic diversification. Many of these countries, like Nigeria, have grown used to being referred to as rich lands full of impoverished people.

Among the many explanations the book proffers for the persistence of 'bitter harvests', 'wasted windfalls' and poverty in oil-dependent Third World economies is that the governments of these countries fail to take account of the fact that 'oil and natural gas extraction is capital- rather than labour-intensive'. Even so, petroleum export 'requires little in the way of linkage into the rest of the local economy'. In reality, rather than automatically stimulating diversification, petroleum production 'tends to create enclave industries'. Shelley points out that these attributes of petroleum underscore the need to use petroleum revenues in the wisest ways possible: diversifying the local economy must be a deliberate endeavour if oil-rich Third World countries want to 'break down the walls of the enclave and loosen their excessive 'ties to the oil companies of the industrialised world' (p.43).

Many readers will find Shelley's accounts of the geographies of petroleum-related civil conflict quite revealing. The coincidence of petroleum exploitation and civil conflict is found in places as far apart as Aceh (a special district in Sumatra, in Northern Indonesia) and the Niger Delta (in southern Nigeria), in Angola and Colombia, and in Sudan and Mynmar. A substantial part of Chapter Two is devoted to case analyses of civil conflicts in Aceh (Indonesia), Niger Delta (Nigeria), Angola, Sudan and Colombia. In the various cases, a point is made of how petroleum intersects with factors such as ethnic, linguistic and religious differences and the colonial experience in entrenching civil conflict.

Cross-border conflict seems also to be a major by-product of petro-capitalism and petro-politics. The book details how in the late 1990s the scramble for control of offshore petroleum resources in the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa 'resulted in more than thirty territorial disputes' (p.79). Nigeria and Cameroon were brought to the brink of a war when the International Court of Justice ruled that the oil-rich Bakassi Peninsula was no longer to belong to Nigeria, but must be ceded to Cameroon – a verdict the Nigerian government rejected. Cross-border tension currently mars the relations between the two neighbours. Western Sahara is still struggling for full independence from Morocco, the multi-billion barrel petroleum reserves in the Spratly Islands are still being contested by at least six countries (China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines Malaysia and Brunei), and given the Chinese economy's rapacious thirst for oil, it is unlikely that China will voluntarily relinquish its claim to the islands. Much of the tension between Iran and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Russia is linked to cross-territorial claims on the oil riches of the Caspian Sea. The now hidden, now open disputes between United Arab Emirates and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, Qatar and Bahrain, and Kuwait and Iraq, all have direct links to oil and natural gas reserves in specific territories.

The discourse on 'Dutch disease' and 'oil curse' has traditionally portrayed economic declines, conflict and the prevalence of corruption in (especially Third World) oil-producing countries as seemingly resulting from the mere fact of petroleum endowment. Shelley adopts a different approach. Although frequently using the term 'commodity curse', he lays the blame for the development predicaments of Third World oil-producing countries on institutional failures. He maintains that the spell of conflict and corruption associated with petroleum production can only be undone 'through the construction of social institutions that impose transparency on the collection and distribution of hydrocarbon wealth' (p.80). He advocates 'the widest popular participation in decision-making', which for some countries would mean confronting ethnic and class divisions and for others regional issues and 'traditions of rule by families or military cliques' (p.81).

Another illuminating feature of the book is that an entire chapter is devoted to the role of Western powers in destabilising oil-endowed developing countries, a situation exacerbated by the fact that Western industrial economies are overly dependent on imported energy. For these countries 'oil and gas are too important to be left to their owners to manage' (p.81). The book details the connections between American neo-conservative Republicanism with the conflict in Iraq. It shows how it has been the United States' desire, since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, to have 'a partner or stooge regime in Iraq' just in case Saudi Arabia could no longer be trusted to play its pro-US role of curbing, from within OPEC's oil price hikes. Indeed, Shelley argues, the United States has used the rhetoric called 'global war on terror' to run a ring around some of the world's major oil reserves. 'War on terror' has served as a pretext for garrisoning the Middle East, 'building air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan', and seeking 'control over Caspian reserves' (p.107).

If Shelley's book makes an important statement on the current state of conflict and insecurity in the world, it is that the lust for oil (within and outside producing states) is central to both.

This is a bold, lively and readable book. It is another vocal example of the longing among analysts and activists across the world for a new energy future.