

Pilgrimage in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Study in the Development of Religious Foci

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KEY WORDS Stress; public opinion; social distance; liminality.

ABSTRACT Outline. In sub-Saharan Africa there are five types of pilgrimages which individuals use concurrently as well as sequentially, representing polyfaceted religious systems responding to varying personal needs rather than as a part of a required religious process of regular religious obligation.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on pilgrimages appears to be almost entirely related to major religions in which believers have travelled in their millions to centres of devotion and supplication related to Christianity, Hinduism and Islam and to a lesser extent in Buddhism and Far Eastern religions (Barber.1991). However a Chinese Communist official has recently stated that the amount of money spent by visitors on votive candles on their four sacred mountains is more than the funds made available nationally for scientific research.

This literature in its theology and in the standard definition of pilgrimage, concentrates on and refers to journeys to places for the carrying out of religious devotions.

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of pilgrim and pilgrimage involves a journey usually a long distance to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion. This definition restricting this process to the sacred as one that is far too narrow to usefully describe the wide ranging social process in sub-Saharan African pilgrimages which can have many functions within a primary religious need or use of a religious process.

However the definition in the New Catholic Encyclopaedia seems to be more appropriate to African traditional pilgrimages (Jarrett, 1911.12,85) in which it is defined as journeys to some place with the purpose of venerating it or to discharge some religious obligation but more particularly in order to ask for supernatural aid.

It seems that the reactions to affliction almost certainly predominate over detached religious devotion and that there are also economic functions since Moslems are allowed to trade along the ways to Mecca on the Hadj and pilgrimage routes have important economic functions .

Religious devotion is a difficult phrase to use in any analysis in the absence of widespread African institutionalised religion in which this is a required cultic activity. Christianity particularly and to a lesser extent Islam institutionally require their devotees to go through devotional exercises based on written regulations; whether this is devotion or submission to an institutional requirement is a difficult point to discover with any person at whatever level of intellectual development.

In sub-Saharan Africa this type of religious activity has not become observably popular and has little part in traditional religious activity which in the main is crises reactive. It is probably confined to professional Christian religious as part of their job specification and to the devout Christian and Moslem.

In Christian medieval history pilgrims are often seen as devotees who wander from shrine to shrine to augment their own individual religious status or subjective religious satisfactions. There are no cultural practices in this area paralleling the Buddhist and Hindu wandering mendicants searching for some form of personal enlightenment. An African engaging in such an activity is either a schizophrenic (Field.1960) or someone seeking release from a particular misfortune who tries one shrine after another in the hope of release.

In this study a place of pilgrimage is defined as a centre of popular religious activity in which the majority of the users do not come from the immediate neighbourhood. Religious activities at such places are defined as any purpose there which involves the use of some non-pragmatic other worldly powers which it is hoped will have

some pragmatic benefits. In the use of these definitions there are no clear dividing lines between western and non-western practices along the lines of social and economic development

These religious centres are in the first instance recognised by public opinion and then by a process of institutionalisation as having specific non-pragmatic powers attributable to a specific charismatic person, living or dead or to some inanimate object to which a religious aura has become attached.

Firstly the five forms of pilgrimage in sub-Saharan Africa are described providing a typology of places and/or persons becoming religious foci. Criteria for their distinction are geographical and social distance, devotion to places and/or persons and the level of institutionalisation. Then some of the issues involved in the analysis of pilgrimages are discussed and lastly whether the various forms of pilgrimage can be understood as stages in a process of religious development.

A. TYPOLOGY OF PLACES/PERSONS BECOMING RELIGIOUS FOCI

1. Individual Foci of Religious Activity Outside Their Communities

One suspects that every society, even the most economically simple societies of hunter-gatherers and certainly by the time they have developed into subsistence cultivators, have had polyfaceted religious ideas and practices. Without the development of religious institutions with a particular social as well as written paradigm, what can be done through or by religious forces is a combination of personal needs, ambition and personality.

The religious paradigm within which the members of most societies operate has always been so loosely formulated that any individual had and still has today the potential to develop their own religious practices without possibly much development of ideas. These require not only reflection but literacy to be sustained beyond memory and biological generations. It is unlikely that there is any uniformity in the religious practices of non-literate peoples and the assumption of uniformity comes largely from a shortage of information. Sukuma propitiation ceremonies are widely different though often

stated to be the same and the development or failure of a particular ritual method have the characteristics of social mutations. (Tanner, 1997).

Some individuals acquire a reputation for providing solutions to the personal problems of those who come to them for consultation. Initially such persons would be known by their ascribed social characteristics and this is likely to make their neighbours both cynical and suspicious of their self-assumed religious powers. Those nearest to them socially would be the ones most likely to resist attributing religious powers to such people because of jealousy over their religious status and economic success.

Their reputations from achieving success in helping other people comes from a combination of their personalities, religious connections with spirits and homeopathic powers for few would risk large quantities of any ingredient for fear of being accused of poisoning, spread geographically outwards and become augmented by social distance; their powers are marketed though public opinion

In practical terms this is a buyer's market in which those in difficulties will travel to where those with the best reputations are practising and they will continue to travel to such personal foci as long as hopes and their resources allow or a cure has been affected either because the social problem has been resolved or reduced and some improvement in the medical condition has occurred. The success rate is probably just as high as in the miracles recorded as having happened at mediaeval shrines; remissions usually occur, social relationships may change for the better and the bases for hysterical clinical conditions can be removed by the rituals of belief.

In the Sukuma area of north-west Tanzania, the clients of traditional healers have tended to come from some distance away and indeed the Sukuma prefer to use the services of those who theoretically have no knowledge of their social backgrounds. The disadvantages of what are public consultations, are reduced by social and geographical distancing.

The Sukuma, an agricultural and pastoral people have no sacred centres and petitioners do not go to shrines as such. The spirit houses in some compounds are not the focus of any personal or family cult but a one-off fulfilment of obligations to a particular spirit diagnosed by a diviner; a reminder of the spirit world rather than

a manifestation (Wijsen and Tanner, 2000).

There is no etching of the sacred into the landscape which in its flatness would perhaps not merit such interpretations. The Sukuma dislike or are unaware of theological abstractions and feel need for such reminders. There is no connection with graves which are unmarked except for Christians buried in cemeteries (Marx, 1977).

Since the problems of sub-Saharan societies are usually attributed to spirits, disgruntled ancestors and the spiritual malevolence of those with whom they are living or working, these visits are pilgrimages; people go somewhere else for consultations involving divination and personal diagnosis and the analyses of their subjective problems. An area may be criss-crossed by childless women seeking a spiritual solution to their infertility.

2. Places and Objects as Foci of Persistent Religious Associations

Pastoral people have sacred places within their areas of movement as well as carrying with them sacred objects. The volcano Ol-donyo Lengai 'the mountain of God' to the Masai of Tanzania has obvious religious significance for them, but it is not the centre of any cult. The poverty stricken Ik of Uganda (Turnbull, 1975) have their local mountain as the centre of their emotional lives. Neither of these societies are sufficiently well-off or stationary long enough to develop cults that relate to places.

As people become more settled, they tend to retain materials which assume religious significance; the objects which have given them the confidence to assume the support of spiritual forces. The Yao of Tunduru who moved there from the south-west in the last century have at Mbasa a shrine containing a packet of earth which they brought with them and which is the centre of a tribal cult used by all of that society as in a large area no other village has such earth shrines. Nuer prophets in the southern Sudan created huge earth mounds as a testimony to and focus for their success.

It seems unlikely that the religious objects of any family except those of chiefs will assume importance beyond kinship. Their primary significance is for individuals and at the most their nuclear families which will always contain affines whose primary religious affiliations will be with their own families to whose areas they

may journey to seek solutions to their own problems. However the regalia of Sukuma chiefs contain sea shells which show the range of the cross-cultural contacts of these inland peoples.

As any society becomes geographically stationary, some parts of that environment will take on sacred values as the sacred groves and springs of Buhaya and Uzigua but such places do not have cult priests in charge of them; they are latent rather than active centres of pilgrimage.

3. The Development of Cult Centres

Northern Nigeria and Kenya are at the southern end of the range of devotion and petition to the tombs of Muslim Saints (Trimingham, 1962, 1964) which is common and popular in northern Africa from Egypt to Morocco (Eickelman, 1976) The decorated flag bedecked tomb on the main road between Mombasa and Nairobi at Mackinnon Road is regularly visited by petitioners who may not all be Muslims. Religious ideas and practices move easily over cultural boundaries and the extent of travel among pre-industrial peoples has usually been underestimated.

Traditional pilgrimages to cult centres may well be a long standing feature of West African religion although most of the contemporary Ghanaian shrines to which pilgrims go, are of recent origin and have a more openly economic basis. It has been commented (Field, 1960: 53) that 'literate have more serious mental trouble than illiterates, for they have heavier demands on their diligence', and this would account for the reported presence there of pilgrims who were teachers, lawyers and elected politicians.

The Boghar cult which spread from northern Ghana to the south so that there is pilgrimage traffic across and between different cultures and societies allowing safe conduct and trading channels between potentially hostile communities. At the same time it provided local religious foci adapted to each area which was well suited to a region with a long term tradition of migration for trade and work (Werbner, 1989: 227-242).

4. Religious Foci Staffed by Professional Impersonal Intermediaries

Authorised Christian shrines all have institutionally committed priests in attendance who process the petitions made by those who

come there. There is a difficulty in such a definition as a cathedral or indeed a parish church certainly has petitioners and there is no data on these people in terms of the distance from which they come nor whether they are distinct from those coming to shrines which are not in their early stages related to churches. In retrospect both may have been connected to miracles subjectively attributed to these places.

In Zimbabwe apart from the competitive work of traditional healers, two factors have combined to make an additional form of traditional pilgrimage of continuing use as well as developing a new form. Traditionally among the agricultural Shona, the Mwali cult of a non-hierarchical High God had involved many in long distance sacred journeys within the tribal area ignoring administrative boundaries, sacred exchanges and a redistributive systems of gifts to God (Werbner, 1989). These shrines with their custodians have retained their value as part of long distance networks for trade and communication.

In addition large numbers of Shona have been periodic migrants to the South African mines and where there were no available traditional or quasi-traditional avenues of relief for their personal problems. Moreover they were working and living in a society that was clearly hierarchical but more specifically both the main and independent Christian Churches were also hierarchical. Whereas traditional religions in east and central Africa tended to operate where their clients lived, these Christian Churches all operated on a 'go to them' basis as they were tied to purposely constructed buildings.

So new ideas entered Shona religious practices, particularly the decline of a convenience factor; they walked much longer distances in order to be in good order with these new faiths which was combined with hierarchy, centralisation and movement. The African Apostolic Church involved all three factors with up to 20 thousand pilgrims attending the annual 'paseka' in the Maranke area of Zimbabwe.

While Christianity in one form or another might have seemed well established in Zimbabwe up to the start of the guerrilla struggle for independence, this long war between whites and blacks meant that the largely urban and industrial structures of Anglican Protestantism and Roman Catholicism became functionally discredited (Ranger, 1987).

During this period the use of traditional places of Mwali pilgrimage and the consultations with their oracle speaking guardians became popular again and this was combined with the growth of local, rural and often independent Christian Churches. However once political independence had been gained, the larger international Churches became relevant again as centres of pilgrimage and patronage as it coincided with the growth of an African urban presence at all levels.

5. Institutionalised Religious Foci with No Human Intermediaries

Mecca and the Hadj are the only example of this type of religious focus and it is there that Islam centres its religious life incumbent on every Muslim to perform once in their lifetime. It is there that all Muslim pilgrims are personally face to face with Allah. The obvious divided nature of Christianity and the absence of any such defined obligation has prevented Jerusalem and Rome from having the same significance.

Muslims from northern Nigeria have travelled the slow route to Mecca across the lower Sahara, the Sudan to the Red Sea for centuries, taking months even years for their pilgrimages, carrying disease and trade along with them (Reynolds and Tanner, 1983: 233). Certainly among the Hausa religious pilgrimage has been established both as an ideal and a reality, giving status to those who returned. Notables going on the Pilgrimage are first known from the end of the 11th century.

With the increasing wealth of the Hausa in business and their dominance in the military, many more Muslims have been able to complete the Pilgrimage by air (Tangban, 1991) and thus the status of those who complete the obligation has been diminished; it is no longer a sign of physical strength and persistence so that the title Hadji and the dyed beard no longer have particular status. It is now more likely for Muslims to be able to deputise others, such as richer family members, to go on the Pilgrimage on their behalf and for some to make repeated Pilgrimages.

In eastern Africa some coastal Swahili have gone on the Pilgrimage and many more from Zanzibar which has always been a centre of Islamic theological thought and training, probably using the annual visit of trading dhows from Oman for transport sailing each way with

the changing monsoon winds. Elsewhere few Muslims have gone because the expense is beyond the pockets of subsistence farmers and their wives as well as the fact that the pilgrimage month follows the lunar calendar and periodically coincides with peak times for farming.

Apart from its religious significance in itself going on the Pilgrimage was a means for rulers in the medieval states of western Africa to acquire legitimacy when they had come to power by force and their Islamic credentials were suspect (Hiskett, 1984: 237), thus reducing potential tensions between the 'ulama' the Muslim theocratic establishment and the ruling group.

It also served as a prelude for Muslim leaders to start a holy war 'jihad'. The fact that going on the Pilgrimage was usually a lengthy business, Mohamad Al-Mal who initiated a 'jihad' on his return after being away for thirty years from 1855, meant that many of these men were much more subject to religious influences than might be the case with modern 'package tour' pilgrims who might perhaps be mostly impressed by the international coverage of Islam.

Those who detoured via Cairo as a long established centre of Muslim learning and Sufi socio-religious groupings, came back with new and influential ideas such as Mahdism and the notion of preparing for the end of time (Hiskett, 1984. *passim*). Perhaps the most important of these was to be aware of Islam as not only international but potentially universal, which made these men see societies in which paganism and Islam were mixed as a provocation to their Moslem idealism and a good enough reason for starting a holy war. The connection between coming back from the Pilgrimage and initiating a holy war seems to have been nearly exact.

B. ISSUES INVOLVED IN SUB-SAHARAN PILGRIMAGES

1. Factors Involving the Use of Religious Foci

There can be little doubt that personal distress, however defined in which there will always be a merging of social, psychological and biological pressures, is at the root of all pilgrim activity; they are seeking relief rather than religious development..

Typically Ghanian pilgrims visiting cult

shrines were healthy people supplicating for protection from jealous kinsmen who begrudged or prevented their success and moreover they did so on an annual basis (Field, 1960: 87); thus pilgrimages are to some extent the answer to institutionalised paranoia.

The wider the social and geographical distance between petitioner and the person or place with real or mythological backing to whom the petition is made, the more effective will be this relief as subjectively felt; it is less likely to be explained away by some personal knowledge or suspicions of fraud. Scepticism is such a general attitude that it cannot be seen as correlated to education or literacy. Moreover social and geographical distance prevents to some extent any local knowledge that pilgrims have been to shrines; distance protects anonymity. The person making the diagnosis through their connections with the spirit world and proposing solutions are not personally responsible for what they say when they are possessed.

The numbers and social range of this clientele will always correlate to the stresses in their society. Whereas in a rural setting a petitioner may travel long distances in seeking relief within a strange environment, within the urban setting, such wanderings are miniaturised with such people moving between personal or impersonal religious foci in different parts of the same town. In the towns there is not only a concentration of people but a concentration of problems which do not slot into traditional categories.

If these pilgrimages are crises related, they are not usually correlated to linear or cyclical rites of passage, although with the Hadj there is the pilgrimage lunar month with Mecca as an empty town for the rest of the year. Those in business or industry are in a better position to fit their absences into their pattern of work than farmers. It does not appear that the Hadj has to be undertaken in order for anyone become recognised as a full Muslim.

So time and motion factors are certainly involved and visits to religious foci by subsistence farmers will coincide with gaps in the agricultural year, particularly the dry season when many go to consult traditional healers outside their own social environments.

In towns visits will coincide with national and personal work holidays and of course relate to bus and train time-tables. There will always be

the cost of the time spent in travelling which is often walking or bicycling and the cost of transport for town dwellers.

For the subsistence farmers who are overwhelmingly the largest group in sub-Saharan Africa, the solutions to their crises will usually be sort in terms of the three first stages and not in the macro centres which would involve a major investment in time and effort beyond their social considerations.

2. Some Issues Involved in the Analysis of Pilgrimages

Very little is known on the motivations for pilgrimages, not only because the assessment of religious activity deals only with the observable; the fact that certain people are there at religious foci at a particular time, a pattern of consumerism, but also because subjective awareness of motivation is variable. The motivation for going on a pilgrimage, being there and in memory is not likely to be constant. Much would depend on who is asking the questions and in what social environment; priest, and male or female lay persons would all get different answers; most people in any culture are not comfortable being asked questions about their religion..

Motivation itself is complex and unlikely to be identifiable as a single factor. One particular motive may indeed be dominant at one particular time; a primary need but there are almost always subsidiary motivations, not easily identifiable or indeed even recognised by the individual, that make motivation a compound of themes.

If this is so for people going to Lourdes (Marinus and Pieper, 1990) which may involve hope but for what, holiday but for whom and happiness from a shared experience, but what experience, then there is no reason at all to imagine that Africans going to and indeed using religious foci, do not have similar and just as complicated motivations.

Many of the subjectively perceived benefits may come from the liminal experience involved in any pilgrimage, even to a neighbouring area in which the pilgrims are away from home and out of their regularly experienced social ambience. The experience of detachment in the forms of psychoanalysis used by most quasi-traditional healers, the meeting with strangers there and the sharing of experiences with people

whom they are never likely to meet again. For this short period of liminality these individuals may well be in psychological rather than just social terms, the centre of their own experiential world; a revitalising short period in personal time.

Essential to this liminal experience is the range of activities which occur at the pilgrimage site and not to the same extent elsewhere; what is on offer. Special singing, bodily movements, processions, offerings made and what has been offered before setting out. The importance of consultations in which the people are passive, the use of oracles and the casting of lots as well as the dyadically active prayers and discussions with resident religious professionals. Most religious foci provide for the collection of objects there to take home to which personal values are then attached and which may be passed on to significant others; water, earth and dried herbs.

There is a credulity factor increasing with social distance in which the distant person or place is believed to have greater powers, may be reversed with the non-believing analyst. Lourdes as an accepted solution would now have a certain respectability as a process which provides a wide range of positive benefits. On the other hand the sub-Saharan sufferer consulting a spirit shrine or spirit motivated healer, paralleling the practitioners of fringe medicine in urban Europe and America, would still be regarded as at best a partially educated example of explicable credulity. The fact these practitioners are providing healing and perform valuable and wide-ranging services is rarely acknowledged. Doctors work for money without having their integrity questioned and so should quasi-traditional healers

In the Christian Churches there are major institutional and theological distinctions between approved and unapproved cultic activities as religious foci. Thus the popular use of a cult centre based on a particular person's vision of the Virgin Mary as at Mwanza, Tanzania would have to continue for many years before the Roman Catholic Church would recognise such activities as religiously valid (Wijsen, 1997).

Islam has only the one theologically and institutionally supported pilgrimage centre, the Hadj to Mecca as one of the Five Pillars of Faith. All the others, principally the tombs of Saints, are sustained and legitimised by popular participation rather than having to be recognised by Islamic institutional functionaries as Islam

has no universal hierarchical structure. This of course makes Islam much more self-cohesive.

Is socio-economic development a factor in the typology of stages. Institutionalised pilgrimage centres are clearly enabled, enlarged and popularised by such a factor. At the end of the last century perhaps some 30 thousand pilgrims made the Hadj, whereas today the figure will be two million.

This is not to conclude that the use of the simpler pilgrimage forms have decreased; they remain popular alternatives as people are still going to use the more convenient and cost effective religious foci which are near at hand and possibly not quite so regimented. Personal distress may be better coped with by appeals to more personalised foci.

It seems unlikely that the use of various types of religious foci are experienced or indeed seen as clearly delineated alternatives. The use of economic resources for getting religious protection is probably universal and continuous, just as consulting people within the religious paradigm is universally intermittent.

Perhaps it is one of the theoretical difficulties in any attempt to evaluate human behaviour that any rational individual may well use different parts of the social system for a particular function, the relief of distress. These different systems can be used one after the other or at the same time, and this clearly happens in economically developed societies with patent medicines, good-luck charms, prayer and scientific medicine being used at the same time for the same objective without anyone accepting that each might or might not work against the others and that to behave in this way is irrational.

So the going on pilgrimages however defined, the use of religious foci away from home, does not appear to be anything to do with intellectual or economic development.. Reaction to crises within a paradigm provided by the community into which they have been socialised. To conclude that there are now more crises than in the past is almost certainly culturally biased when the recent histories of virtually every individual have involved warfare, famine and disease and various forms of personal disaster. The change to a miraculous conception of what can be achieved through a pilgrimage seems to be an urban-industrial development as people move into environments that cannot be related to their own subjectively appreciated culture.

The ambivalence with which the Roman Catholic authorities view the Mwanza visionary and the Buhaya holy springs is not just a question of rival devotional foci; this would be the simplest and perhaps the easiest to understand if it could be accepted as just institutional hierarchical rivalry. A rivalry which is built into the social perceptions of most sub-Saharan social systems. Religious institutions and their theologians have to get their practices justified through the medium of literate logic so that para-liturgical activities are always on the fringe of official acceptability.

These various forms of pilgrimage discloses a rivalry between the power of prayer in the abstract which is made to a spring or shrine which cannot answer and the power of interpersonal petition in which an answer is given (De Waal Malefijt, 1968: 196, 227). It is rivalry between two different functional systems which are not specifically Christian or traditional.

It may be possible to see this in terms of abstract rivalry; a systems approach but there is a problem here in such cultures as that of the Sukuma where the social structure is noticeably unsystematic despite that there are five million of these people with their own language. What they do on a pilgrimage is no more than a paradigm for behaviour within wider parameters. The boundaries of Sukuma society are too wide to correlate religious behaviour with any specific function (Eickelmann, 1976).

It seems that an action approach is more appropriate within which the individuals are relatively free to choose the objective and the object of their pilgrimage; there are so many personalised alternatives that the level of individual choice remains high because public opinion free from mass media infiltration remains the channel through which choices are made.

While in a more property settled society there might be a more static and structural vision of sanctity and what could be achieved through pilgrimage making, there is an even wider range of personal choice. A pilgrim can choose between the structural and the personal as well as between the near and the far; many more alternatives than there would be within the reasonable walking range of a farmer or pastoralist.

It is easy to see that the growth in the use of certain religious foci is the result of easier travel and institutional promotion and to conclude that

this is something new and part of a widespread process of religious regeneration. In sub-Saharan Africa movement to religious foci outside their communities is as old as records go and we can assume that it is even older than that. If and when these societies of subsistence farmers obtain the wealth of the western world we can anticipate that they also will extend the range of their pilgrimages but until then they will continue to go as pilgrims for the relief of their difficulties to the people and places that are near at hand but still distinct from their own social environments.

None of the pilgrimage centres relating to either persons or places appear to have become symbols of tribe or to have any political correlations (Wolf, 1958), nor do they appear to have an integrative function for disseminating tribal orthodoxy (Redfield, 1956); if anything it may be that a very loose form of orthodoxy finds its expression in these pilgrimages rather than the other way round. Certainly such pilgrimages are not a means of infiltrating the use of new common language in religion (Srinivas, 1967) since much of the sounds used are glossolalia or in the tribal dialects of petitioners and pilgrims.

3. Stages in the Development of Religious Foci

Sub-Saharan societies in their patterns of pilgrimage going show processes of religious activity which are both sequential as well as being concurrently operational in which there is a scale of solutions to personal problems. These involve increasing social and economic costs as well as social distance factors between the persons and the objects of their religious attention.

This suggested typology is not a scale in which each stage cancels out the previous one but refers more to their institutional complexity in which individuals can utilise any one form initially, sequentially or concurrently. Indeed it is possible that an individual may use all five ways of regaining equanimity more or less at the same time if their resources allow. The most important point of this typology is the predominance of popular religious practices to the probable exclusion of theological considerations.

This typology is also a function of the extent to which all sub-Saharan societies have become institutionally varied in terms of solutions to

individual and collective difficulties. Even the simplest of subsistence communities will have many variations in what they see as the activities of people involved in religion. For these people religious practices are much more varied in their possibilities and it all happens in a market place of alternatives.

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