

By Morten Nielsen

# INVISIBLE WORLDS

## SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COSMOLOGIES IN A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

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In the preface to the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) argued that,

“Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer” (Potter 1993:188).

It is perhaps relevant to ponder whether Kant was correct in assuming that those crucial questions, which ‘transcend’ human powers, *by themselves* remain unanswer-

able. In many Euro-American societies, there is a tendency to think of the cosmological foundations of existence based on the Greek notion of *kosmos* as the ‘ultimate principles and/or grounds of the phenomenal world and the human place in it’ (op.cit.:4). While such cosmological principles are considered fundamental to existence, they are also paradoxical in nature; by retrospectively searching for the cosmological foundation of human life, we are faced with the infinite regress of a cause searching for its own cause. Recalling the well-known fable of the turtles standing on each other’s backs all the way down, infinite regress is, in a sense, the manifest consequence of a cosmological thought that tries to think through its own conditions of possibility.

### INVISIBLE WORLDS

Considering the paradoxical nature of Euro-American cosmological thought, it is quite remarkable that sub-Saharan African cosmologies have for so long been exoticized as the radical ‘Other’.<sup>1</sup> A few centuries ago, European travelers visiting the continent were not able to find holy scriptures, sacred buildings or organized forms of priesthood and therefore concluded that Africans had no religious or spiritual life at all. Much later, colonial administrators discovered ‘ethnic religions’ as integral to local cultural traditions, e.g. regarding Yoruban or Zulu religions, but they were still reluctant to consider these as parallel to European religious belief systems. As have been documented by anthropologists working in Africa, the

problem in understanding sub-Saharan African cosmologies was that many African societies did not use concepts that corresponded to what Europeans understood as 'religion' (Ellis and Haar 2008:183). In many if not most societies across sub-Saharan Africa, human life continues to be guided by an understanding of the universe as animated by spiritual forces, which are knowable only through their effects (Arens and Karp 1989). Not unlike Euro-American societies where the ultimate principles of existence are fundamentally hidden, there is thus more to life than meets the eye. Reality contains not merely the visible realm but, equally, an invisible world 'distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world' (Ellis and Haar 2004:14). In contrast to Euro-American religious belief systems (say, Protestant Christianity), however, spiritual powers residing in the invisible world are not imagined as supernatural but, rather, as *natural* forces and beings. Crucially, in many sub-Saharan African societies, the invisible world is occupied predominantly by deceased ancestors still asserting their influence on the lives of the living (Peek 1991; see also Nielsen 2012). In his classic study of the Tallensi of northern Ghana (Fortes 1987), Meyer Fortes describes how,

'(A) person's physical extinction does not obliterate the impress of his life on his society. Material objects he created or was associated with outlive him, and what is more the living (especially his progeny) continue him, partly physically, but more mysteriously in their personalities and in their relationships with one another, as if he were in some sense still among them' (op. cit.:7).

In an altered and inherently invisible form, deceased ancestors thus continue to exist as central figures to be reckoned with. In southern Mozambique, for example, it is widely held that when a person dies, the spirit remains "as the effective manifestation of his or her power and personality" (Honwana 1997:296). Death merely signals the transition to a new dimension of life from where spirits continue as real beings to assert their influence on everyday matters. According to Junod, any deceased individual becomes a *shikwembu* (god) who should be seen as an "exact continuation of this earthly existence" (1962b:373, 376). In that regard, the Changana<sup>2</sup> notion of *moya* is significant.<sup>3</sup> Literally it designates the wind or spirit – even *air*, as people in

Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, will say. In his analysis of personhood in the South African Lowveld, Niehaus describes the concept as the human spirit leaving the body after death (2002:195, 201), and from my conversations with urbanites living in Maputo, I got the same impression. Spirits live as omnipresent beings detached from their human body, while still remaining on the same existential level as human beings, as is most clearly apparent from their relative limited powers and 'want of moral character' (Junod 1962b:425). Ancestor spirits focus on their own lineage and do not hesitate to punish severely those who do not abide by their rather idiosyncratic normative rules.<sup>4</sup> Most Mozambicans have two names, their Portuguese public name, which is what defines the individual as a national citizen, and a traditional name, given concomitantly after birth to confirm the relationship with the particular ancestor who is the living person's namesake (Junod 1962a:38). Name-giving essentially constitutes an extension of the living person (Changana *nàvålàlà*) whereby his or her personhood is formed in a relationship between the living person and the deceased spiritual namesake (Changana *màb'izweni*). In order for the living person to benefit from the relationship, he or she must consequently reciprocate the actions of the *màb'izweni* through rituals and commemorative ceremonies in honour of the ancestors.

Through divinatory rituals, ancestral spirits guide their descendants while also enabling the latter to control particular forces in the world

that shape or affect their lives. The possibilities for increasing one's own resources and possibilities among the living by harnessing the powers of the invisible realm is, however, also what constitutes the greatest threat to one's existence. Not everything is known, and what is known is that power works in hidden and capricious ways. Basically, it is never possible to fully gauge whether someone else is attempting to gain a wrongful advantage by inflicting harm on his or her peers. As Ashforth tellingly argues in his analysis of witchcraft in Soweto, South Africa, 'unless you have good reason to believe otherwise and only for so long as those reasons remain plausible, everyone must be presumed able and willing to cause you harm' (2005:66). In this particular context, life was built on a 'presumption of malice' where it could be assumed that anyone with the motive to cause harm *would* cause harm, e.g. through witchcraft attacks orchestrated by ancestral spirits guiding the lives of their descendants. According to Geschiere (1997), witchcraft is closely linked to understandings of kinship, as occult forces always operate from within. Witchcraft is the "flipside of kinship" (ibid.:25), as it were. In the urban Soweto community like in many different settings across sub-Saharan Africa, people live with witchcraft as a constant and latent possibility, implying that a person's spirit is continuously exposed to harmful intrusions by witches secretly lurking in the community (cf. Stewart and Strathern 2004:79). If the witch successfully captures a person's spirit, the victim's

physical body will appear to be dead, while the spirit continues a nocturnal, zombie-like existence as effective labour for the sorcerer (West 2005:181, 186; 2001:138; Junod 1962b:514; cf. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 1998; Niehaus 2005).<sup>5</sup> In ‘*Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique*’ (West 2005), Harry West eloquently shows how acts of witchcraft might enable the instigating person to manipulate and draw advantages from otherwise dangerous forces when approached through specialists capable of seeing the hidden dimensions of existence. In these instances, witchcraft crystallizes the otherwise unattainable possibilities that are only accessible by engaging with powers which at the outset are ambiguous and imbued by uncertainty even to the expert (Geschiere 1997:23-24; Peek 1991:14).

## DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY

While communities in both urban and rural environments across the continent are built around the need for physical proximity, social intimacy is not unproblematic. In many African languages, notions of intimacy between people rely on registers of spoken as well as unspoken ambivalences: Intimate relations are seen as essential but, at the same time, it is also those who are closest to you who pose the greatest threats to one’s very existence. This might pertain to relatives, neighbours, friends, state officials or deceased ancestors still affecting the lives of the living. While it would not be possible to occupy social positions in local communities without having to engage with these significant others, they might also be potentially harmful, say, when seeking to appropriate one’s belongings or simply by attempting to cause harm out of envy or vengeance. Hence, in a world ‘whose every crevice potentially conceal(s) peril’ (West 2005:34), a fundamental question is how to properly distance oneself from one’s intimates who are crucial to one’s social existence, but who may also turn out to be detrimental or even lethal. To live in close proximity to others potentially exposes what is best kept hidden and that is why mechanisms of concealment and distantiation are often required. In various ways, members of the same community can signal how they are mutually other and thereby allow social life to be guided by a certain kind of ‘intimate distantiation’. In other words, while living close to relatives, friends and neighbours without whom one could probably

not survive, it is equally important to try to conceal ‘purposes, possessions, propensities, practices – and, even more subtly, to conceal concealment, to hide the fact that anything at all was being hidden’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:275). Let me briefly expand on this point by referring to a concrete example from Maputo, Mozambique:

According to residents living in Mulwene, a neighbourhood in Maputo, a household is protected against harmful witchcraft attacks by its family spirits resting under the *gàndzèlò* (the ancestors’ altar), which is usually the largest tree on the plot. In several instances, however, additional measures are put in place, as the malevolent spirits might be stronger than the ancestral spirits protecting the house. A sorcerer is then summoned to perform *kubiamúnti*, i.e. a ceremonial act intended to protect the household from harmful intrusions (cf. Ashforth 2001:213). Ideally, *kubiamúnti* occurs before people move into the house, but as it is a costly ceremony (approximately 250 USD), it is usually performed only when the house owners discover that they are being attacked by malevolent spirits. Andréa Machava, a resident living in the area, had been ill for some time and despite several visits to the community hospital, her condition continued to worsen. Andréa therefore decided to consult a local sorcerer (Changana *nyamu-soro*), who confirmed what she was already suspecting, namely that she had been attacked by a malicious spirit. According to Andréa, her father had killed a person during the civil

war<sup>6</sup> and now the spirit of this person wanted revenge. Hence, in order to resolve the unfortunate situation, Andréa and the sorcerer decided to make a *kubiamúnti* ceremony in order to extract the spirit causing the illness while also securing Andréa’s house against further attacks. The ceremony had two phases. First, the sorcerer located and extracted the evil spirits. This was done by the sorcerer physically ‘eating off’ Andréa’s body until the harmful forces were removed. During the second phase, the house was shielded by burying magical items treated by a secret mixture of herbs in all corners of the plot. Whereas an unprotected household is visible to harmful spirits, irrespective of whether it is occupied by ancestral spirits, after the *kubiamúnti* ceremony it was completely invisible to them.

## MAKING SPACE

In many sub-Saharan societies, then, spiritual and physical realities interweave to such an extent that any radical distinction is obsolete. There is essentially no ontological distinction between relationships established with (physically living) peers and those established with deceased ancestors. Still, while it is possible to communicate with invisible worlds, it is not always apparent what is being said. Ancestral spirits are erratic beings, whose intentions and desires cannot always be predicted in advance. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to engage with the invisible realms of existence without exposing oneself to the harmful forces that always lurk underneath

the surface of the visible world. Confronted by a multitude of uncertainties that threaten the stability of one’s existence, it does seem as if the physical world has been overtaken by invisible and inherently dangerous forces (De Boeck 2013). Only a few weeks after the *kubiamúnti* ceremony, Andréa was beginning to doubt the efficacy of the sorcerer’s actions. For more than a year, Andréa had made a small but growing profit from selling vegetables at the local market and one of her neighbours had become quite envious of Andréa’s success. Hence, as Andréa reasoned, it might be that the neighbour had orchestrated a witchcraft attack on her with the objective of ruining her business.

The challenge for many Africans is consequently how to orient themselves in a world that has become ever more murky and fragmented. What are the remedies for engaging with a social environment that is structured by the collapse of viable distinctions between the visible and the invisible realms of reality? Perhaps the recent upsurge in the spread of religious movements across the continent should be read as a possible response to this widely felt state of acute insecurity. In Ghana, for example, Pentecostalism has become increasingly popular and not least because it takes seriously people’s fears and concerns about living in an increasingly volatile and ambiguous social environment by offering to reveal the occult forces that operate underneath the surface of the visible world. Considered as such, modern Christianity has not displaced ideas about the importance of ancestral spirits. Rather, it has ‘provided a new context in which they make perfect sense’ (Moore and Sanders 2001:16).

Invisible worlds exist everywhere. While conjuring paradoxes that are both perplexing and even unfathomable, they also generate imaginaries, connections and opportunities that would not otherwise be considered. What is particularly unique about certain sub-Saharan African cosmologies is the capacity for *making spaces*; that is, for creating physical, social and spiritual room to accommodate the coexistence of contrasting and often opposing forces in the world. One’s social existence is never a given and spaces therefore have to be made where the opportunities and benefits of social relationships can be harnessed without having to endure harmful attacks from those significant others without whom social life would be impossible.

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NOTES

- 1 In the following, when I speak about ‘otherness’, it should be understood not merely as someone who is spatially exterior but as someone considered as strange; a stranger. As argued by Stasch, social otherness exists ‘when a person experiences as different and strange not just any object, but an acting being. The other being is thought to have some kind of consciousness of itself and surrounding events. The other being’s consciousness is part of that being’s otherness, part of what is different, separate, and strange about him or her. “Social otherness” foregrounds a crucial element of routine human intersubjectivity: the forms of separateness and strangeness that lie between persons who are conscious of each other’s consciousness’ (2009:15-16).
- 2 Changana is the Bantu language that is most widely spoken in the southern part of Mozambique.
- 3 Significantly, among the Changana-speaking people of southern Mozambique, ancestor spirits are referred to in the plural as *svikwembu*, whereas the Christian God is described using the same term but in singular, i.e. *xikwembu*.
- 4 This close association also indicates that if a family moves from one place to another, the ancestor spirits willingly go with them, provided that an appropriate commemorative ceremony is held at which living relatives inform their ancestors of the impending relocation.
- 5 We might consequently follow Jean and John Comaroff, who argue that in such ‘occult economies’, a conjuring up of wealth is possible through the use of ‘mysterious techniques’ unknown to ordinary people (1999:283).
- 6 From 1977 and until the signing of the Peace Accord in Rome in 1992, a devastating civil war raged between the ruling Frelimo party and Renamo, a guerilla movement supported first by Rhodesia and later by South Africa.