CHAPTER THREE

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN NORTHERN CAMEROON:
LOCAL AND GLOBAL NEGOTIATIONS

Researchers are attracted by new religious movements because of their undefined nature: they are societies in the making. Still, new social constellations always have a history; they are the final links of a chain forged by spiritual and material entrepreneurs over a considerable period of time. This chapter will take a closer look at some of these entrepreneurs, who through recent historical developments have created a specific multireligious culture in northern Cameroon through cultural and spiritual exchange, regional migration, and overseas’ expansion. African traditions strengthened ethnic boundaries and provided plausible insights into a complicated universe, but they were also systems which were open for exchange. The Islamic religion slowly penetrated the region in the early 19th century through political conquest and military and economic supremacy while also being influenced by the religious traditions it encountered. The colonial presence changed face and attitude when the European powers invaded the northern area. What started out as a peaceful collaboration in trade turned into a quest for material benefits and political domination and was soon followed by white missionaries who sought new fields for evangelical harvest. This historical background of African tradition, Islam, and missionary Christianity, related to colonial administration and independent politics, makes up the social, political, economical, and spiritual context within which the new Pentecostal churches try to establish a foothold. Regardless of how oriented they might be towards the future, the new churches have to relate to material and spiritual power structures which are the results of two centuries of negotiations over body and soul and over mind and might.

The Emergence of a Multireligious Culture

The city of Ngaoundéré is today the home of a variety of multireligious practices, a crowded arena where the new charismatic churches struggle to find a place of their own. The present situation is on the one hand the result of slow changes and two centuries of historical missionary activities,
from both Muslim and Christian communities. On the other hand, today’s religious landscape is rapidly changing due to Arab influence through scholarships to young Cameroonian students and Pentecostal churches trying to challenge the hegemony of the historical churches established by foreign missions. Any study of the present religious changes would thus have to be developed on a canvas of historical reflections in order to make sense. It is obvious that the ‘new Christianity’—the main focus of this study—could never be created in a religious void simply because religious voids do not exist in Africa, not even in modern, so-called secularised cities. Religion has been part of the social organisation of African communities as far back as collective memory can recall. African traditional imagination provided a cosmology which organised family and village life, an imagination which had to fight and mingle with Islamic influence in northern Cameroon after Uthman dan Fodio started his local jihad in Sokoto in 1804. Both of these religious traditions had to rethink the basis of their existence when the Christian missionaries, albeit few in numbers, entered the region in the 1920s and proclaimed a new religious message fuelled by technological and academic supremacy.

In this struggle, the French colonial administration with its political programme of laïcité promoted the idea that religion should belong to the private sphere and that all religions should be treated equally, or perhaps ignored equally. But as in most other parts of colonial Africa, neutral politics towards religion could never be anything but an illusion. As was the case in the British-dominated areas in Nigeria and East Africa, the French did much to secure an Islamic political stronghold in northern Cameroon, a stronghold that outlived independence and grew stronger for two post-colonial decades. A historical presentation of the creation of a multireligious culture in Ngaoundéré will therefore also have to include the politics and the attitudes of the French colonising culture, which to a large extent influenced African tradition, Islam, and the Christian missionaries.

African traditions will in this part of the chapter have to be our point of departure because the African religious imagination and the African maps of reality, or, if you like, African worldview, have survived and prospered within both Islam and Christianity, being influenced by a rich variety of ethnic traditional religious practices. This religious influence is vibrant and obvious to the inhabitants of the area, but it is only to a very small extent a visible part of everyday life in Ngaoundéré. Whereas beautiful mosques, huge churches, cars, satellite dishes on rooftops, and hundreds of motorcycle-taxis are visible signs of modern material change, the