CHAPTER SEVEN

MY ROCK, MY SHIELD, MY STRONGHOLD AND MY REFUGE

My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my saviour—from violent men you save me. (2 Samuel 22: 2–4)

The form of Christianity we looked at in the previous chapter is essentially a religion of the elite: much of it is imported, reformulated and to some extent adapted, to be enunciated by a hierarchical Church, often in somewhat abstract terms, and addressed primarily to the class in Benin society that, historically, it has sought to create, educate and influence. It is backed up by the institutional substance and considerable capacity of the Catholic Church, which, with all the external connections that contribute to its considerable socio-political weight, has established itself as a significant local actor. It is discreet, conservative and always has an eye on its own survival sur le terrain. In real terms, this means that it usually intervenes only when it sees its own interests being threatened or when what it regards as essential moral precepts are being neglected in the formulation of legislation. Its influence reached something of an apotheosis in the period 1989–1993 when its participation in the CNFVN brought it into a more active role. Since then, however, its has retired again to purely pastoral and development activities with the occasional homily addressed to the political elite or to the country at large, which serves as a reminder that it is still there.

As has been the case elsewhere in Africa, however, there has also been a movement ‘par le bas’, the development of popular, indigenous forms of Christianity, as well as the importation of other forms, most notably charismatic, which have had remarkable success over the past two decades. These have sought to adapt the Christian myth, most strikingly in the CCC, but also in more recent developments across the denominations, with the development of theologies and ministries that can be seen as an attempt to respond to the more immediate needs of this fragile society.
The emergence of a Christianisme béninois

Benin appears to be moulding a Christianity of its own across the different denominations. While the missionaries may have felt the constraints of Cartesian rationalism in their approach to their ministry, eschewing visions, healing and miracles ‘outre ceux de la science’, Béninois Christians feel no such constraints in the development of homiletics, rites and rituals, far beyond the limits of what is foreseen by a more orthodox version of inculturation. These are used to confront a world that continues to be perceived as fundamentally fragile, unstable and threatening. This is a world where Legbà is never far away, as this brief prayer by a member of the Eglise Africaine Apostolique illustrates:

May those who have had their eyes burst by Legbà recover their sight in the name of Jesus. May they find the road to his kingdom.

May all the forces of Vodòn be exterminated in Benin.

As well as this adaptation of the Christian myth, there is the development of new forms of Church organisation. These tend to be less hierarchical, more participatory and more community-based, though they are clearly still dominated by the big men of God. These attract large numbers of adherents as they seek to offer new spaces and new communities or quasi-communities in a society, which, as we have seen, has great difficulty in attaining the social cohesion necessary for state construction. In terms of political science, this may be the Church as ‘exit option’ but, in the terms of the adherents, it is the Church in more biblical terms as rock, shield, stronghold and refuge. It is from within these spaces of relative security, these quasi-communities, that le petit béninois chrétien—the urban trader, artisan, apprentice, housewife and their aspiring but often frustrated children—look at state and society and struggle to find a utopian vision discourse that

1 Inculturation is a recurring theme in Catholic theological discourse, particularly in Africa, though many theologians now prefer the term interculturation. Defined as “the process by which catechesis takes flesh in the various cultures”. Ecclesia in Africa notes that: “Inculturation includes two dimensions: on the one hand, the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and, on the other, the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures” (Ecclesia in Africa, 59).

2 In de Surgy, Syncrétisme, 54.