seem, however, that Tcherkézoff himself merely turns the tables. Instead of binary columns his scheme emphasises two rows, in his terms the superior and the inferior levels. But what is represented, according to his ‘hierarchical dualist method’, is a logic of oppositions not only much more complex (the superior level encompasses the inferior) but also more dynamic (images of the totality and the part, of ‘the royal’ and ‘the ordinary’, transform into their alternatives). In other words, Tcherkézoff follows Dumont in his approach to what Dumont calls ‘the encompassing of the contrary’, according to which ‘the element belongs to the set and is in this sense consubstantial or identical with it; and at the same time the element is distinct from the set or stands in opposition to it’ (cited at page 121).

In a period in which metaphor has become such a major concern of textual studies, Tcherkézoff’s book represents a positive counter-influence; it is a valuable guide to the current structuralist rethinking of metonomy in the quest for a better perspective on part-to-whole relations in African religious symbolism.

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Laitin, David D., Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba, Chicago and London, the University of Chicago Press, 1986, xiii, 252 pp. £25.50 (cloth), £11.95 (paper), 0 226 46789 9, 0 226 462790 2 (paper).

The purpose of David Laitin in this work is to continue the search for a theory of culture that would be scientific and have predictive values superior to William Geertz’s social systems theory and Abner Cohen’s rational choice theory. Neither Geertz nor Cohen, he argues, can satisfactorily explain why religious change among the Yoruba, which produced a Muslim and a Christian sub-culture with different socio-economic statuses and different ways of viewing politics, failed to replace the ancestral city of origin with religion as the determining factor in the political affiliation and preferences of the Yoruba. He has therefore developed a hegemonic theory of culture—modifying that of Antonio Gramsci—in which it is argued that it is not the sub-systems that interact with other sub systems to determine choice and preferences. Rather, one specific
sub-culture becomes hegemonic, ensuring that its values and preferences are seen as obvious, commonsensical, and unquestioned, while choices involving other interests are made secondary and more variable. For the Yoruba, Laitin sees ethnicity or loyalty to the ancestral city of origin as the hegemonic subculture that overrides other criteria of choice. This hegemonic subculture is not the static primordial attachment to “tribe”, but the dynamic culture of an elite who derive their strength from colonial policies and values imposed from outside.

Such a brief summary can hardly do justice to Laitin’s aims and achievements in this learned but lucid exposition. He presents religion and politics among the Yoruba only as a case study. But it is one of his objectives that a good theory of culture should not only provide a basis for general comparability of several cultures, but should also be capable of illuminating each particular culture. It is therefore appropriate to ask to what extent his study has helped to illuminate the interaction of religion and politics in Yoruba society. He appreciates the formidable task involved in a foreigner penetrating what he calls “the secrets so firmly embedded in the local culture” and of a participant observer making a rapport with two rival elites—Muslim and Christian in Ile-Ife—to the point of knowing their “practical religion”, religion not just as beliefs but as working ideologies and philosophies in daily life. His success in these tasks is impressive and there is no doubt that he presents an insightful picture of religion and politics in Yoruba society. But have the views presented ceased to be one man’s analysis and become the “truth”, “facts” on which to construct a scientific theory? It is true that to facilitate comparability, he reduces practical religion to a set of symbols and he redefines culture to focus on “points of concern”. But many of his observations are bound to remain controversial. For example, he writes that “Central to the Yoruba traditional religion is the idea that religious expression is fundamentally private... The public nature of prayer in the orthodox Christian and Muslim traditions represented a challenge to the Yoruba tradition” (p.35). Or: “Christian concern for orthodoxy suggests that correct belief is more important than responsible action” (p.73).

The other question concerns the effectiveness of the new hegemonic theory in explaining apparent paradoxes within a culture and in predicting possible lines of action in the future.