EDITORIAL

MAL-ADJUSTMENTS: RITUAL AND REPRODUCTION IN NEO-LIBERAL AFRICA

The papers presented in this special issue make a persuasive case for the emergence of distinctive social conditions across the African continent, as well as the value of innovative modes of analysis for examining complex, novel connections between economy, society and ritual practice. All four young scholars ground their work in meticulously observed ethnographic cases, and—in the best tradition of anthropological analyses—use the specificities of local experience to offer compelling comparative propositions. In this way, not only are the vagaries of abstractions like 'structural adjustment', 'privatization' and 'market reform' shown to have a concrete relevance to the experience and activities of African peoples from urban Senegal to rural South Africa, but the reconfiguration of these particular social and religious worlds can be grasped as alternative transformations of a shared, wrenching global process.

When Africanist scholarship draws attention to remarkable socio-cultural shifts, such as those ushered in by what is broadly described here as 'neo-liberalism', there is often a tendency to seize (if not to fabricate) a vanguard position. Thus, a great many students of African culture and history have insisted that globalizing projects (of which neo-liberal reform is but one example) produce profound ruptures in the nature of sociality across Africa, ruptures which call into question the very possibility of social scientific inquiry. The radical displacement of persons and polities under postcolonial conditions, goes the argument, vitiates the prospect of engendering all but the most ephemeral forms of social collectivities, or cultural meanings. In my view, such assertions are especially problematic with respect to the discussion of religion and ritual practice—in no small part because anthropological assessments of the latter have long been concerned with the ways that communities across Africa symbolically organize, interpret and act upon social upheaval. The claims that witchcraft addresses misfortune, or that divination is a form of social analysis, are hardly cutting-edge assertions
of postcolonial theorizing. A great strength of the papers in this issue is the way in which their demonstration of the specific ‘crises’ brought about by the collapse of state services, currency devaluations, and radical retrenchments in diverse socio-economic contexts is grounded in an understanding of the long term effects of these communities’ efforts to grapple with the strains and contradictions of social order. Given such an understanding, this neo-liberal moment can be recognized as a part of the still-unfolding trajectory of modernity, itself a heterogeneous project that emerges in contingent encounters amongst varied histories and cultures. These ‘mal-adjustments’, as these papers make plain, are historically specific, and empirically all too real, while simultaneously emergent within long-standing processes of symbolic practice and fields of social actions.

A hallmark of these authors’ works is their resolute renunciation of the simple binarisms typical of so many claims about African religiosity. The contrasts of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’, ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’, ‘resistance’ and ‘accommodation’, or ‘individualistic’, and ‘collective’, to cite only a few of the more obvious terms, are clearly no longer valid either as observable phenomena, or as analytical categories. Even the seemingly disparate institutions of schooling and initiation must be comprehended, in Zolani Ngwane’s trenchant phrase, as ‘constituent parts of a single world’ in South Africa’s Eastern Cape. The same must be said of civil servants and majini spirits in coastal Kenya, or circuits of overseas commodity trading and life-cycle rituals in Murid communities, as well as labor migration and ancestral sacrifice in rural Zululand. Modernity has been realized, in Africa and elsewhere, as a kind of totality. This is a totality that is characterized by contradiction and tension; and these tensions suffuse the modes of ritual and religious consciousness that are commonplace in ‘modern Africa’. As any number of scholars have demonstrated (in any number of works published in this journal), the anxieties of modernity are often manifest in symbolic vehicles that capture the ambiguities of transforming social contexts. Thus, the figures of mermaids and Mami Wata popularized in Congolese genre paintings, and venerated in innovative vernacular religious movements across West Africa, bespeak the simultaneous allure and horror of modernity’s possibilities. So, too, the widely recognized resurgence of witchcraft and sorcery as central elements of a modernist cosmology has been convincingly linked to the uneasiness that surrounds the modernist production of value. The apparently capricious circulation of wealth, as some accumulate fortunes while others suffer material collapse, is commonly understood as the product of supernatural