

Religion, identity constructions and nation-building in Africa and Asia (20th and 21st centuries)

November 6th 2024

INHA, 2 rue Vivienne, 75002 Paris, amphitheater

Conveners: Matthias Hayek (EPHE-PSL, CRCAO) & Agnieszka Kedzierska Manzoni (EPHE-PSL, IMAF)

The post-colonial worlds in the broadest sense – including former satellite countries of the Soviet Union and those in the so-called “global South” – are witnessing a religious revival reflected in the proliferation of various “back-to-the-roots” discourses and currents. From an anthropological perspective, the practices promoted in their frame share many formal characteristics of the global New Age and Modern Paganism. From a historical perspective, these new developments are reminiscent of the “indigenist” movements that flourished in post-romantic Europe, or in Japan, and which aimed to “rediscover” a (true or authentic or ancestral) culture, or even an “original” religion, predating Christianization /Westernization (or Buddhization/sinization in the Japanese case). This re-appropriation of the past implies in fact its re-imagining

A striking example of this kind of “religious re-imagining” would be the “kemit” or “Kamit” movement that emerged in the USA at the end of the 20th century. Its representatives – often educated or residing in Europe or the USSR – call for the replacement of “imported” rituals (Muslim or Christian), that have been present across the African continent for several centuries, with rituals for marriage, name-dating or funerals which they present as precolonial and ancestral.

All of the movements under question wish to restore a continuity with the past damaged by the colonial encounters. Yet, whether referring to the Pharaohs of Egypt, Sunjata Keita, Chaka Zulu, Attila or Genghis Khan, they conceive of this past as glorious and localized, as one's own - not universal. Unlike the followers of Western modern paganism, who generally imagine the Golden Age as a time of human egalitarian coexistence in harmony with Nature, the movements partaking in the religious revival in the postcolonial contexts depict this idealized past as the time of great empires or kingdoms: highly stratified states with hereditary power structures. They are often based on the model of a kinship group - a clan, a family, a lineage, - with common (mythical) ancestors, usually presented as the illustrious builders of these great – and first! – civilizations. Their claim to primacy enables them to define these civilizations as being at the origin of humanity and all its inventions. Could it be the feeling of dispossession that inspires the search of the pre-eminence of yesteryear? Why should this pre-eminence to be restored through ritual practices, by a return to supposedly ancestral, pre-colonial religious traditions or “spirituality”? These are among the questions that the symposium aims to shed light on, using examples from Africa and Asia analyzed from a comparative perspective.

While trying at once to grasp the particularities of each given case under study and to highlight sometimes unsuspected convergences between discourses and practices in African and Asian postcolonial contexts, we intend to contribute both to a better understanding of the new forms of ritualization expanding globally and to that of the articulation between religion, collective identity constructions, (the return to) tradition and the rise of nationalism more generally.

Program

9 :00 Welcome of the participants and opening remarks (M. Hayek & A. Kedzierska Manzoni)

AFRICA

9:45 – 11:15

Paolo Israel (UWC, South Africa)

“Dance and the Sacred in Socialist Mozambique: The case of the Mapiko masquerades”

Gaetano Ciarcia (CNRS IMAf)

“Memory and theatre of Vodun cults, between the colonial situation in Dahomey and the current situation in Benin”

11:15 – 11:30 Coffee Break

11:30 – 13:00

Marleen de Witte (Utrecht University, Netherlands)

“Sankofa: Return and restoration from neo-traditional religion to heritage restitution”

Agnieszka Kedzierska Manzoni (EPHE-PSL IMAf)

“(Pan-)African Religion: Kemits, Ancestors, Ancient Empires and New Rituals”

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch break

ASIA

14:00 – 15:30

Ippei Shimamura (National Museum of Ethnology, Japan)

“Recreating the glorious past: the magical efficacy of the ‘Ancientization’ of the traditional costume in Contemporary Mongolia”

Florence Galmiche (Université Paris Cité, CCJ)

“No decolonization without national reunification? Contemporary ritual and political activism under the aegis of Tan’gun, mythical ancestor of the Korean people”

15 :30- 15:45 Coffee Break

15:45 – 17:15

Raphael Rousseau (Université de Lausanne, IHAR)

“National narratives, religions and patterns of civilization in Adivasi India”

Edouard L’Hérison (INALCO, IFRAE)

“Takeuchi’s Divine Empire: Hyper-Antiquity and the Destiny of the Japanese Nation”

17:15 – 17:30 Coffee break

17:30 – 19:00 General discussion and roundtable

ABSTRACTS

Paolo Israel
Department of Historical Studies
University of the Western Cape

Dance and the Sacred in Socialist Mozambique: The case of the Mapiko masquerades

When the Front for the Liberation for Mozambique (Frelimo) took power, after a ten-years revolutionary guerrilla fought against Portuguese colonialism, it was faced, amongst other things, with the challenge of relating to the cultures of the rural African population, which formed the vast majority of its constituency. To do so, the movement's leadership resorted to a paradoxical double move. On the one hand, following a classic Marxist paradigm, it disparaged traditional African culture as "obscurantist" and "feudal." The African peasant would have been in the clutch of superstition, ageism, and gendered oppression. On the other, following a Fanonian and Maoist paradigm, Frelimo saw the consciousness of rural masses as more authentic than the one of urban elites, whose mentality would have been irremediably corrupted by colonialism. Therefore, Frelimo actively promoted a process of appropriation of African cultural forms, which would gain citizenship in the new socialist nation on condition of undergoing a process of purification and transformation, shedding all residues of ritualism and superstition and embracing a new revolutionary lexicon and visuality. The revolutionary party organised a number of cultural festivals and recording campaigns to promote this appropriation. This process was gradually interrupted by the civil war that ravaged the country from the 1980s onwards, but left an indelible mark on a number of Mozambican cultural expressions.

This paper follows the history of *mapiko*, a tradition of masquerading practiced in the northerly province of Cabo Delgado, cradle of the liberation struggle. *Mapiko* is at once anchored in puberty rituals, gendered secrecy, and the magico-religious sphere, as well as it is an expressive art, encompassing sculpture, drumming, song and dance. To be admitted in the pantheon of the new nation, the masks had to shed all residues of ritualism and embrace socialist realism and the celebration of the vanguardist party and its leaders. The paper will show how *mapiko* practitioners responded to the prescriptions of revolutionary nationalism with a variety of strategies: enthusiasm on the one hand; subtle reproduction of patterns, such as ritual competition, deemed regressive; and outright rejection of specific dictates. Finally, the paper will have a glimpse at the status of *mapiko* today, after the collapse of revolutionary nationalism, when Cabo Delgado is in the clutch of a deadly Islamist insurgency.

Gaetano Ciarcia
CNRS, IMAf

Memory and theatre of Vodun cults, between the colonial situation in Dahomey and the current situation in Benin

In Benin, we can study the contemporary institution of Vodun cults as a cultural heritage through the history of the transatlantic slave trade, missionary evangelisation and colonization. In my paper, based on ethnographic and archival research, I will examine how the schooling of local elites, ethnological discourse and the advent of the national state all form part of a genealogy of stereotyping and constant re-signification of local religious life.

Sankofa: Return and restoration from neo-traditional religion to heritage restitution

Based on my long-term research on religion and heritage in Ghana, this presentation takes up the question of return at stake in this conference in the double, interconnected sense of 1) a “return” to the religions and traditions of a pre-colonial African past, as advocated by traditionalist religious revival movements; and 2) advocacy for the return of cultural heritage objects kept in European museums. What connects the “going back” and the “giving back” is that, under the sway of colonialism and missionary Christianity in West Africa, the suppression of indigenous culture and religion went together with a massive expropriation and displacement of its material culture. With thousands and thousands of African cultural artefacts kept in museums all over Europe (which I argue must be included in any concept of “the post-colonial world”), the issue of provenance and restitution is ever more pressing and Africans’ call for reparation and restoration sounds ever louder. In this context, the Akan philosophy of Sankofa (literally translated as “go back and get it”) inspires not only a search for rediscovering and rehabilitating precolonial culture and indigenous knowledge, but also – more recently – for reclaiming expropriated heritage as its material embodiment.

Looking at indigenous religious movements that advocate a revival of the precolonial in connection to advocacy for the return of stolen or otherwise appropriated heritage, I will discuss two case studies: the Afrikania Mission’s “Sankofa faith”, a neo-traditionalist religious movement founded in Ghana in 1982; and current Ghanaian perspectives on and claims to Akan religious/spiritual objects in Dutch ethnographic museums. In both cases, a quest for rehabilitating an African cultural identity violated by colonialism gives rise to specific desires for and projections of authenticity. Also, in both cases indigenous religious traditions get mobilized as cultural heritage, yet cannot easily be contained in the heritage frame. Moving from neo-traditional religion to heritage restitution, I will reflect on the articulations and tensions between religion, spirituality, and heritage in the ongoing quest for decolonial restoration.

Agnès Kedzierska Manzon,
EPHE-PSL, IMAf

“(Pan-)African Religion: Kemits, Ancestors, Ancient Empires and New Rituals

The neologism “Kemits”, derived from the biblical name for the peoples inhabiting Africa (Kemet), refers to the followers of a religious current that emerged in the United States at the end of the 20th century and is currently spreading in Africa and its diasporas.

Drawing on the model of a kinship group – a clan, a family, a lineage, an ethnic group – with common ancestors, usually said to be the illustrious builders of great – and first! – empires, the Kemits claim the “anteriority of black civilization”, which enables them to define themselves as being at the origin of humanity and all its inventions. Like many other indigenous and neo-pagan movements worldwide, they desire to return to their roots: to Pharaonic Egypt, for example, highly mythologized and presented as the birthplace of the black civilization, or to the no less mythologized kingdoms of Kongo, Ashanti or Zulu.

Such “back to the roots” move is seen as a mean of restoring a depth of history damaged by the colonial encounter and as a way of putting an end to the subjugation – whether colonial, postcolonial, or neo-colonial – to be blamed for the current economic, social and political problems undermining life in many African countries.

To bring back to life the golden age, the Kemits implement new forms of ritualization supposedly rooted in the past, which, unlike those practiced by the contemporary western pagan, are often conceived as having a biological subtract. Whether presented as rituals or as conferences, lectures or talks, such new forms of ritualization allow the adepts to enact their blackness and, through appropriation of the concept of African religion, contribute to the construction of (pan-) African identity and community.

Drawing on the ethnographic materials from Mali and South Africa, this paper presents the Kemits movement and some polemics surrounding it.

Ippei SHIMAMURA
National Museum of Ethnology, Japan

Recreating the glorious past: the magical efficacy of the “Ancientization” of the traditional costume in Contemporary Mongolia

Once peoples in the socialist countries under the Soviet regime lived in an “alternative modernity” which differs from Western modernity. Mongolia had also enjoyed socialist modernity and had an image of itself as an advanced country: Mongols boasted their first cosmonaut as the second Asian who go into space. However, with the collapse of socialism, Mongolia became a “developing country” aided by the former Western countries. In other words, it can be said socialist modernity was relatively deprived compared to Western Modernity. Instead of socialist modernity, some of them found religious culture as their emotional support. Hence, religious culture such as shamanism, Buddhism which socialist regime once designated ‘remnants of pre-modernity’ revitalized rapidly.

However, the “revitalisation of religion” is not confined to the religious sphere but quasi magical practice in their fashion culture. Here I would like to discuss the magical efficacy of their traditional costume.

Quite intriguingly, Mongolian *deel*, or their traditional costume, which is suitable for pastoral life style, was standardized with simple design and plain fabrics such as “Mao suit.” In the post-socialist era, however, Mongols started to recreate brand new “ancient style *deels* with fancy designs and luxurious materials because they have taken to their ‘fashion competition’ for lunar new year, new year’s party, graduation ceremony, and wedding ceremonies. Because, after the collapse of socialism, people in Mongolia changed their mindset from the socialist “egalitarianism” to the capitalistic competition. Under these circumstances, genres such as body-conscious ‘*gangan deel* (fashionable costume)’ and ‘*goyolyn deel* (Sunday best costume)’ were created.

Furthermore, since the late 2000s, a new traditional costume called ‘*Khunnu* (Xiongnu) *deel*’ which is believed to have magical power of the glorious past has emerged. This is not a revival of the ancient Xiongnu national costume, but rather a fusion of designs based on archaeological sources and contemporary Western fashion. This kind of practice of bricolage is referred to by Mongols as ‘*Mongolchilokh* (Mongolisation)’.

In this presentation, I will decipher the meaning of the bricolage between ‘ancientization’ or Mongolisation and Western modernization in their local and globalized socio-cultural context. In other words, I would like to explore why and how, by returning *deel*’s designs to the

‘ancient’ period of the Xiongnu and the Great Mongol Empire, the Mongols are re-creating modernity, giving their costumes magical and spiritual meanings which can be connected to their nationalist ideas.

Florence Galmiche
Université Paris Cité, CCJ

No decolonization without national reunification? Contemporary ritual and political activism under the aegis of Tan’gun, mythical ancestor of the Korean people

The figure of Tan’gun, mythical ancestor of the Korean people, played a pivotal role in several so-called “new religious movements” in the early twentieth century, in a context of resistance to foreign influences, particularly Japanese colonization. Some of these movements placed Tan’gun as a tutelary figure, even as a deity, notably the religious group Taejonggyo 大倥教, followed later by other movements. Tan’gun’s spiritual and political importance during Japanese colonization was significant and has lasting influences on the culture of both Koreas. However, the religious groups claiming devotion to Tan’gun declined in the second half of the twentieth century, although several continued to exist in both the south and north of the peninsula.

Today, this mythical ancestor is mostly associated with folklore or the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century. However, he continues to be invoked in political battles, particularly that of reunification. New organizations – combining political, ritual and moral activities – were created at the beginning of the twenty-first century in South Korea, and decided to rely on Tan’gun and the teachings attributed to him. In particular, some got involved in projects to “repatriate” the remains of Korean forced workers who died in the Japanese Empire during the colonial era (with the problematic question: to which Korea?). These organizations are small in size, but until recently (January 2024) had the characteristic of having counterparts in North Korea, with official authorization to act as an interface between the two Koreas.

This presentation analyzes how the figure of Tan’gun was remobilized at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It focuses on the way these groups combine the spiritual and moral dimensions connected to him, together with political activism for reunification. It also analyzes how these organizations have relied on “new religious movements” that are now old, even apparently outdated (e.g. the Tan’gun religions of the early twentieth century colonial period), to challenge some contemporary narratives of the history of Korea’s colonization and liberation, in the context of increasingly difficult mobilizations in favor of the peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula.

Raphaël Rousseleau
Université de Lausanne

National narratives, religions and patterns of civilization in Adivasi India

In this contribution, I propose to examine a few cases of versions of history by scholars from groups recognized as Adivasi or “Aborigines” of Central India. I will begin with a historical overview to distinguish several narrative models, responding successively to the royal-brahmanic, then colonial-missionary, and hegemonic national context of Indian history. I will then focus mainly on the writings of intellectuals from the beginning of the Adivasi movement in the 1920-30s, because we can follow their growing dialogues with colonial

institutions, ethnology of the time and with Indian and Hindu nationalists, around various aspects of 'civilization': race, language, script and literary tradition, forms of religion, political autonomy, etc. Here we find similar reflections that agitated European nationalisms of the same period, but around the Aryan vs Dravidian division, the Dravidian or Munda origin of the protohistoric Indus civilization, the situation of the aborigines in the 'kingdom of Rama' (Gandhi, Savarkar), but also rarer references to lost continents (Lemuria, Gondwana) disseminated notably by the Theosophical Society. More recent publications show that these dated references continue to nourish the contemporary imagination, although the dominant trend is towards a new model of sustainable civilization with a “nature worship” ahead of its time.

Edouard l'Hérissou
INALCO IFRAE

Takeuchi's Divine Empire: Hyper-Antiquity and the Destiny of the Japanese Nation

In several recent Youtube appearances, Watanabe Kazuhiro 渡邊一弘 (1959-), a well-known martial arts master, asserts that the Japanese people are descendants of the peoples of Mu and Lemuria, and that their emperor, an ancestor of the founders of the great human civilisations, once ruled the entire world. According to him, the Japanese, direct descendants of the people of Jōmon who themselves inherited the genes of the celestial beings who descended on the continent of Mu, occupy a very special place within humanity: they are called upon to be a new model for the world, based on the preservation of ancestral knowledge to which the West has turned its back in the course of its history. Such assertions are characteristic of the “new spiritual movement” (*shin reisei undō* 新靈性運動), a stream that emerged in Japan at the very end of the 1970s, which overlaps in many ways with the New Age movement and illustrates the religious mutations characteristic of “à la carte religions” highlighted in the Western context by Danièle Hervieu-Léger.

Many representatives of this protean dynamic share a vision of the Japanese as a people apart, characterised by their uniqueness and the authenticity of their traditions. In fact, the new spiritual movement is also part of the discourses on Japaneseness (*nihonjin-ron* 日本人論), of which it represents the “spiritual” counterpart. For example, Ōkawa Ryūhō 大川隆法 (1956-2023), the founder of Kōfuku no kagaku 幸福の科学 (Happy Science), asserts that Japan is linked to the so-called “lost continents” and their mythical peoples, all of whom descend from the ultimate god El Cantare. Similarly, in the wake of the triple disaster of Fukushima in 2011, Takeuchi Yasuhiro 竹内康裕 (1955-), great priest of the Kōso kōtai jingū shrine 皇祖皇太神宮, argues that the “true” history of the archipelago holds the secrets of a new harmony with nature and the gods, which is the key to prevent further catastrophes to happen.

The aim of this paper is to identify one of the main origins of such contemporary discourses blending the quest for national identity and “hyper-antiquity” theories. To do so, it will highlight the links between the fact of linking Japanese uniqueness to the ancestry of a celestial people and the vanished civilisations that descend from it and the theories of Takeuchi Kiyomaro 竹内巨磨 (1874-1965), the founder of Kōso kōtai jingū Amatsukyō 皇祖皇太神宮天津教, a new religious movement created in 1900, whose rather small size does not reflect the tremendous influence it exerted on the religious and political elites of the time. The evocation of this community centred on apocryphal writings and the production of relics assumed to corroborate its mythical narrative will also make it possible to understand how contemporary thoughts mobilising hyper-antiquity in their construction of a national identity and destiny also

have roots in the premodern autochtonist theories of the Japanese Studies (Kokugaku 国学) scholars.