Practising Ecumenism Through Boundary Work and Meta-Coding

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Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on religion in Zambia, this article engages critically with approaches that suggest that ecumenism necessarily occurs across socio-religious boundaries. I argue that the objective of ecumenism – namely, good-willed co-operation between religious practitioners who are otherwise separated from each other in terms of their institutional affiliations – can also be attained through boundary work and use of the meta-codes 'non-Christian – Christian' and 'Christian – "real" Christian'. I contend that using these meta-codes in the logic of what has been called 'fractal recursion' allows people to stress situationally the existence of commonalities between religious practitioners and/or religious groupings that, at other points in time, are perceived to be different from each other. In this way, the shifting of categorical boundaries produces ecumenical reality effects.

Keywords: ecumenism; meta-coding; fractal recursion; Christianity; Zambia

Introduction

The analysis presented in this article was triggered by my feelings of surprise when I looked at my ethnographic findings on a religious field in southern Zambia, in particular the Gwembe valley, through the lens of the concept of ecumenism.[1] This religious field contains a multiplicity of religious players and communities ranging, among others, from *masabe* possession cults and 'traditional' herbalists and diviners (*bang'anga*) to Christian churches with organisational connections with headquarters in the global north and African-initiated churches, for the most part of the Pentecostal–charismatic variety.[2] When conducting long-term participant observation within this religious field, attending the rituals and gatherings of various religious communities and accompanying my interlocutors during their prolonged quest for spiritual empowerment and sacred truths, I came to realise that there was a lot of movement and many exchanges between

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1 Fieldwork in Zambia was conducted intermittently from 1993 to 2015. For detailed ethnographic descriptions of this religious field, see, for example, T.G. Kirsch, 'Restaging the Will to Believe: Religious Pluralism, Anti-Syncretism, and the Problem of Belief', *American Anthropologist*, 106, 4 (2004), pp. 699–709; T.G. Kirsch, *Spirits and Letters: Reading, Writing and Charisma in African Christianity* (Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2008); T.G. Kirsch, 'Spirit Idioms and the Politics of Context', in B. Meier and A. Steinforth (eds), *Spirits in Politics: Uncertainties of Power and Healing in African Societies* (Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2013), pp. 91–113; T.G. Kirsch, 'The Precarious Center: Religious Leadership among African Christians', *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, 5 (2014), pp. 47–64.

2 In the early 2000s, the following African-initiated churches were active in the area of my research: African Apostolic Faith Mission, African Apostles of John Maranke, Apostles of Jesus, African Church, Church Service of Christ, Full Gospel Church of Central Africa, Foundation Church of Jerusalem in Zambia, Zion Church, Spirit Apostolic Church, St Moses God's Holy Spirit Church of Zambia, Spiritual Church of Kabwe and Pentecostal Word of God Ministry. The denominations that had organisational connections with headquarters in Europe or the United States were: Apostolic Faith Church, Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, New Apostolic Church, Pilgrim Wesleyan Church, Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-Day Adventist Church and United Church of Zambia.

the different communities. Yet, though these took place across institutional boundaries, they were almost never framed as official ecumenical co-operation between religious institutions.

When seeking an explanation for this form of socio-religious fluidity, Elizabeth Colson's groundbreaking work on religious life in southern Zambia is helpful. On the basis of more than 50 years of research among the Tonga, Colson makes it clear that, following the advent of Christianity in this region in the early 20th century, religious practices that 'spoke to the common experiences of people living in small relatively self-sufficient egalitarian … communities' gradually gave way to a diversification of religious options.[3] At the same time, what appears to be a common theme throughout this transformation is that individualism is 'much prized by Tonga men and women'.[4]

The movements and exchanges between different religious communities that I observed during my fieldwork can be interpreted as reflecting the existence of both a diversified religious landscape and my interlocutors' appreciation of individualism. Yet, while providing important insights, these two factors cannot explain the internal dynamics of the religious field in the Gwembe valley that make my interlocutors' practice of a seemingly non-ecumenical form of grassroots ecumenism possible.

The present article explores these internal dynamics to shed light on the everyday production of what I call the 'ecumenical reality effects' that take place outside the framework of institutionally arranged forms of ecumenism.[5] This allows going beyond the by now commonsensical idea that socio-religious boundaries are of a flexible and permeable nature. Analytically, it also enables us to carve out the most prominent socio-religious mechanisms by means of which this subtle yet widespread form of ecumenical boundary work is enacted.

A basic challenge for a fresh understanding of ecumenism is to bring into relief how, while maintaining distinct religious affiliations in terms of their institutional memberships, people aspire to co-operate in actual religious practice. More particularly, what has to be examined, along with their aspirations, is the way in which participants achieve good-willed religious interaction on certain occasions, such as at Easter or Pentecost, despite the existence of recognised differences between them. When analysing constellations like these, certain conceptual hurdles become obvious. Overcoming them in respect of my ethnographic findings is one of the aims of this article.

As noted above, the following account is based on my research on a religious field in the Gwembe valley, primarily among Pentecostal–charismatic churches and members of what have been called 'spirit-type movements'. For instance, at all of the inter-congregational meetings that I attended, those invited included members not only of the branches of the host church, but also of other churches. The dominant appeal in this situation was to inclusiveness, but not to membership for all in one church. Everyone present was treated equally and was expected to be in spiritual co-operation because grassroots ecumenism prevailed. At the same time, there was also an attitude that might be called 'anti-ecumenical', or simply exclusivist, in that most of those religious practitioners who were not present at the event were implicitly treated as being beyond the pale or openly labelled as not belonging to the group of 'real' Christians.

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3 E. Colson, *Tonga Religious Life in the Twentieth Century* (Lusaka, Bookworld Publishers, 2006), p. 8.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 235.

5 In using the phrase 'ecumenical reality effects', I am loosely adopting an idea by French philosopher and literary theorist Roland Barthes who, writing about narratives, describes how certain elements of a text can make it feel real for the reader. Similarly, my analysis of ecumenism in this article is less concerned with the nuts and bolts of official and doctrinal ecumenism than with interactions between religious practitioners that make ecumenism an experienced reality for them. See R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989).

One conceptual hurdle for my analysis comes from the wider discussion about ecumenism in the history of Christianity. As regards the latter, certain theologically informed arguments seek to unravel the difficulties in making 'the one Christian church'.[6] Yet, in the light of my research findings, this debate focuses too much on the normative idea of the 'broad church' as a comprehensive and internally integrated unity within one overarching institution. In addition, as I demonstrate below, the misleading assumption in most of this work is that socio-religious boundary-crossing is essential if the objective of ecumenism is to be realised.

I suggest that the empirical phenomena commonly associated with ecumenism can be studied productively in certain contexts in Africa and elsewhere without subscribing to the latter premise. To put it in a nutshell, I argue that the objective of ecumenism – namely, good-willed co-operation between religious practitioners who are otherwise separated from each other in terms of their institutional affiliations – can also be attained through two socio-religious mechanisms: boundary work and meta-coding. This analytic approach, which turns to tactics of self- and group identification, allows new insights to be acquired into ecumenical realities under conditions of efflorescence in religious pluralism, in particular among people living in the Gwembe valley, but also in many other parts of the African continent.

The term 'meta-coding' describes a specific form of discursive practice. In it, a classificatory code, such as a contrast, is temporarily employed to subsume other classificatory codes of people's sense-making.[7] In my analysis of the empirical case study that follows, the meta-codes of primary interest are 'Christian – non-Christian' and 'Christian – "real" Christian'. I contend that using these meta-codes in the logic of what Susan Gal has called 'fractal recursion' allows people to stress situationally the existence of commonalities between religious practitioners and/or religious groupings that at other points in time are perceived to be different from each other.[8]

On the other hand, certain basic assumptions of the term 'boundary work', as commonly used by anthropologists, can be traced back to Fredrik Barth's studies of ethnic boundary-making.[9] More recently, it has also become a prominent concept in the field of Science and Technology Studies.[10] In the present article, this notion is important for my proposition that, in southern Zambia, ecumenical reality effects are often produced through the enactment of boundary work, that is, by temporarily relocating the boundaries of socio-religious inclusion and exclusion.

In the first part of the article, these concepts are combined to examine how meta-coding is employed to realign socio-religious boundaries on different levels of sociality. By moving a socio-religious boundary outwards, its social inclusivity is increased, while at the same time implying that what the religious practitioners on the 'inside' of the boundary have in common with each other outweighs the differences between them. Shifting a socio-religious boundary in this way thus brings about ecumenical reality effects, though not the unity of 'one church'. In this part of the article, it also becomes clear that religious lives in the Gwembe valley have to be understood in relation to wide-ranging possibilities for personal selection among changing options within a complex religious field, including disparate religious communities, some belonging to the Christian fold, others locally assumed to be outside it. Over a lifetime,

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6 R. Rouse and S. Neil (eds), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948* (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 3rd edition, 1986).

7 For another use of this term in Africanist anthropology, see R. Rottenburg, *Far-Fetched Facts: A Parable of Development Aid* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2009).

8 S. Gal, 'A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*,13, 1 (2002), pp. 77–95; S. Gal, 'Language Ideologies Compared: Metaphors of Public/Private', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 15, 1 (2005), pp. 23–37.

9 F. Barth, 'Introduction', in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1969), pp. 9–37; see also A. Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013).

10 See, for example, T.F. Gieryn, 'Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists', *American Sociological Review*, 48, 6 (1983), pp. 781–95; T.F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999).

a religious practitioner can be affiliated to several of these communities, sometimes in turn, sometimes almost simultaneously.

In the second part of the article, I broaden the perspective to explore human–spirit interactions as well. I demonstrate that the social composition and socio-spatial scale of a given religious community in this religious field, irrespective of whether it is locally classified as 'Christian' or not, are co-produced with how the spiritual entities that are considered relevant to that specific community are conceptualised and experienced in people's everyday lives. In the final analysis, this boundary work, with its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, leads to the formation of 'socio-spiritual communities' while also inducing ecumenical reality effects between them.[11]

Shifting Boundaries through Meta-Coding

Early in the 1990s, Johannes Fabian cautioned anthropologists working on religious movements in Africa to refrain from conceptualising them as 'surrogate tribes, that is, social entities with clear boundaries and marked internal structures'.[12] Instead, he advocated a 'theoretical stance which refuses fixation on the integrating, stabilizing, soothing functions of religion'[13] and which takes account of the internal strife, contestations and contradictions to be found within religious movements. At around the same time, Terence Ranger made a strong plea to acknowledge the fluidity and simultaneity of different religious practices in southern Africa:

> [a] hypothetical man in precolonial Southern Africa could belong successively, or even simultaneously, to … overlapping networks of religious relationships: for example, he could express his control of his household through a localised ancestral cult, carry tribute to a distant territorial shrine, belong to a gun-hunter's guild, and be an initiate of a possession cult that linked him to the men and women who lived along a trading route.[14]

Similarly, religious practices in the area of my research in present-day Zambia are characterised by a marked selectivity. Individuals have wide-ranging possibilities to make personal choices concerning their participation in a given religious community, to circumvent other people's attempts to exert dominance over them, and to leave different doors open in terms of what they consider plausible religious truths or viable religious practices. Thus, broadly speaking, changing one's religious affiliation repeatedly (although sometimes only temporarily) represents the rule rather than the exception. What is more, although adjustments to a new Christian church frequently entail suggestions of exclusivity, in the sense that 'our Church is the only divinely ordained community', in the long run the intersection of different Christian and (allegedly) non-Christian practices during the lifetime of any one person builds up a certain variable stock of religious knowledge.

In combination, Fabian's insistence on the internal diversity of religious communities and Ranger's remarks about people's non-exclusive engagement in different forms of religious practice within pluralist socio-religious fields have done much to bring into question the idea of religious communities as bounded and internally coherent 'surrogate tribes'. Yet, stressing diversity, flexibility and flux in how religious membership is enacted practically should not lead us to declare that the social, institutional and symbolic boundaries between religious communities, as well as those within them, are irrelevant. Rather, the question is how to

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11 Concerning the concept of 'socio-spiritual communities', see T.G. Kirsch, 'Intangible Motion: Notes on the Morphology and Mobility of the Holy Spirit', in R.L. Blanes and D.E. Santo (eds), *The Social Life of Spirits* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 33–51.

12 J. Fabian, 'Six Theses Regarding the Anthropology of African Religious Movements', in J. Fabian, *Time and the Work of Anthropology: Critical Essays, 1971–1991* (Chur, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), p. 116.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

14 T. Ranger, 'The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History', in R.W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993), p. 74.

conceptualise these boundaries in order to grasp the empirical dynamics of socio-religious boundary work adequately.

As mentioned above, a useful way to do this is to take inspiration from Barth's classical writings on ethnic boundary-making, as well as from Gal's more recent work on 'fractal recursion'. As is well known, Barth proposed a relational theory of ethnicity and focused on the symbolism of drawing boundaries between ethnic groups, thus distancing himself from substantivist approaches that concentrated on the 'cultural stuff' enclosed by these boundaries.[15] In what follows, I adopt this perspective to analyse the context-dependent practices of boundary work in the socio-religious realm. However, I am less interested here in the ways in which boundary work aims to establish distinctions between one group and another than in the fact that those who draw a boundary between themselves and others are by doing so giving expression to their perception that the religious repertoires shared by the members of their respective in-group outweigh the differences between them.

Secondly, I suggest that such boundary work can be found not only between religious communities but also within them, because, as Marilyn Strathern has noted in another thematic context, analysing comparatively the different levels or scales of sociality should take account of 'the relative containment of comparison or differentiation'.[16] On a similar line of thought, Roy Wagner has argued that, '[a] fractal person is never a unit standing in relation to an aggregate (read individual to society or group), or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit, but always *an entity with relationships integrally implied*'.[17] More recently, in developing an innovative semiotic approach to the public/private distinction, Gal uses the term 'fractal' to argue that

> contrary to … commonsense usage, 'public' and 'private' are not particular places, domains, spheres of activity, or even types of interaction. Even less are they distinctive institutions or practices.… [Instead,] the public/private dichotomy is best understood as a discursive phenomenon that, once established, can be used to characterize, categorize, organize, and contrast virtually any kind of social fact: spaces, institutions, bodies, groups, activities, interactions, relations.[18]

What is more, according to Gal, the private/public distinction follows the logic of 'fractal *recursions*', by which she means that the same distinction is repeated at different scales: 'in any public/private contrast one can always focus on only one "side" and make the same distinction within it. There can always be a public imagined or projected to exist within any private, and privates can be nested inside publics'.[19] To illustrate her point, Gal gives the example of the common conceptualization of bourgeois domestic space in America:

> [a]t a first look, the privacy of the house itself contrasts with the public character of the street around it. If we focus, however, on the inside of the house, then the living room becomes the public, that is, the public part of a domestic private space. Thus the public/private distinction is reapplied and now divides into public and private what was, from another perspective, entirely 'private' space. But even the relatively public living room can be recalibrated – using this same distinction – by momentary gestures or utterances, voicings that are iconic of privacy and thus create less institutionalized and more spontaneous spatial divisions during interaction.[20]

Drawing on my research findings from the Gwembe valley, I will make use of Barth's and Gal's concepts in order to highlight specific mechanisms of grassroots ecumenical practice that are enacted not only by co-operating across socio-religious boundaries, but also by situationally shifting them through the use of meta-codes to make them more inclusive. My analysis starts out

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15 Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, pp. 9–37. For a post-Barthian position, see O. Zenker, *Irish/ness Is All Around Us: Language Revivalism and the Culture of Ethnic Identity in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, Berghahn, 2013).
16 M. Strathern, *Partial Connections* (Oxford, AltaMira Press, 2004), p. xxi.
17 R. Wagner, 'The Fractal Person', in M. Godelier and M. Strathern (eds), *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 163, emphasis added.
18 Gal, 'A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction', pp. 80–81.
19 Gal, 'Language Ideologies Compared', p. 27.
20 Gal, 'A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction', p. 82.

from the perspectives of the members of African-initiated churches while also taking account of the wider religious field in this region, which, besides a diverse set of Christian churches, comprises a variety of non-Christian religious practices such as *masabe* possession cults and 'traditional' herbalists and diviners. To do so, I will zoom in from (a) the macro-level of interdenominational co-operation to (b) the meso-level of what happens within the institutional framework of a given church and, finally, to (c) the micro-level of single congregations.

Macro-Level Boundary Work
Anyone joining an African-initiated church in the Gwembe valley during one of its inter-congregational meetings, like those at Easter or Pentecost, will realise that, in most cases, these meetings gather not only committed members of the branches of this church, but also a number of people from the villages next to the place of the event who are active in other Christian communities in their everyday lives. On many occasions, choirs and representatives of the leadership from churches with congregations in the vicinity are also present, since they have been invited to join the proceedings and to take part in, among other things, overnight services and singing competitions.

What is noteworthy in this context is how in particular this ecumenism is achieved through socio-religious boundary work. First, in all the instances that I witnessed during my fieldwork, prior to the inter-congregational meeting the church leadership came up with a decision about which other religious communities to invite to co-operate and, by implication, which ones to exclude from the event. Secondly, once this selection had been made and once these invited non-members had become an active part of the ritual proceedings, the differences between them and members of the church were no longer mentioned. In other words, in the course of the meeting they were effectively treated like regular participants, thus infusing the festivities with an air of *communitas*. If socio-religious distinctions with reference to institutional boundaries were made meaningful, these related not to the diverse group of people present on the ritual ground, but to the differentiation between them and those religious communities that were not present at the event.

This form of boundary work basically pertains to the meta-coded question of which religious communities are to be counted among the selected group of divinely ordained churches and which are perceived to lack legitimation through the Christian God. In the case of the former, the institutional boundaries formally separating the churches – as expressed, for example, in different denominational names and church constitutions – were said to be of no relevance. Instead, the respective churches were dealt with as if they represented different manifestations of one and the same divine truth. Among the churches that co-operated during such meetings, this implied that institutional boundaries were not perceived as constituting a separating factor between them; the latter were interpreted as having a purely human and thus negligible origin, and as not reflecting God's will. By contrast, as regards the religious communities that were absent from the church meeting, institutional boundaries were construed as being coextensive with the classificatory boundary between ('true') Christianity, on the one hand, and misleading or even harmful religious practices, on the other, such as the use of herbal medicine for healing or the fact that in some religious communities women were allowed to deliver sermons.[21]

Meso-Level Boundary Work
An analogous constellation can be observed on the meso-level of African-initiated churches. In these churches, the founding of branches tends to represent a spin-off of healing activities by church elders from headquarters, whose representatives tour different places to preach and

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21 It should be noted, however, that literally none of the criteria used to draw classificatory boundaries was applied universally or agreed upon by all religious practitioners. Instead, they were the object of situated and often conflictual social negotiations (see, for example, Kirsch, 'Spirits and Letters', pp. 130–31).

to heal the afflicted. Some of those who receive successful spiritual treatment subsequently open a branch.

However, branches are sometimes established without headquarters knowing about it. For example, several years ago a branch leader called Kedrick visited the senior leadership of the Spirit Apostolic Church at its headquarters in Siamujulu village, close to the town of Choma. They had not been in contact with each other for almost five months, but now Kedrick wanted to talk about the organisation of a projected Pentecost meeting in his home village of Mazwange in the Gwembe valley. During the discussion, he informed the senior elders that two new branches had recently been founded in villages close to Mazwange. The senior leaders were obviously surprised by this development, yet they were also excited about it, and declared it to be a clear indication of the imminent success of the church. During the following weeks, the two new congregations pursued their religious practices without interference or instructions from the headquarters of the Spirit Apostolic Church. Some time later, when the Pentecost meeting was held, at which different congregations were present, the senior leadership summoned the founders of the new congregations to give them religious instructions – all of which turned out to be confined to general remarks about proper Christian behaviour and the responsibilities of church elders. Then the general secretary wrote down the names of the new leaders in a list, and certificates were issued to the new office-holders indicating their offices. The senior leaders also prayed publicly for the new elders. From then on, the Spirit Apostolic Church officially consisted of two more branches.

This case is of interest in the present context for several reasons. First, the range of the Spirit Apostolic Church had increased outside the control of the Church's headquarters. Secondly, the local leadership was confirmed by the senior leadership only after the fact. Thirdly, and most importantly, despite such official assimilation, the relationship between headquarters and the branches was characterised by a notable degree of ignorance and potential conflict, since none of the parties involved had any detailed knowledge of the others.

It is thus possible to discern two dimensions that allow for a specific form of socio-religious boundary work within the institutional framework of the church: whereas the elders at different hierarchical levels demonstrated unanimity, reciprocal respect and a readiness to co-operate when acting in front of the laity and when interacting with outsiders to the church, their internal relationship was often characterised by dissension and ignorance of one another. This also meant that the leadership of the church presented it as a coherent and unified whole when they saw fit to do so. Yet on other occasions they rhetorically distanced themselves from specific organisational units within their own church. For example, when they got to know about certain practices in the branches of which they disapproved, such as the use of herbal medicines for healing, the senior leadership of the Spirit Apostolic Church was adamant in publicly declaring that divine truth was to be found only at the headquarters, while, according to them, the branches concerned were in urgent need of religious advice. In turn, junior leaders at the branch level sometimes suggested that they were actually doing the groundwork and that 'genuine' – that is, effective – spirituality was consequently more prevalent in local congregations than at headquarters.

These potentially divisive dynamics within the church were meta-coded through a variant of the one discussed in the introduction of this article. When drawing distinctions between the Spirit Apostolic Church and other religious communities, the meta-code was mostly based on the categorical contrast between 'Christians' and 'non-Christians'. Within the institutional confines of the church, however, it pertained to the contrast between 'real Christians' (that is, those claiming religious superiority for themselves) and 'Christians' (those acknowledged to be Christians, but also said to be in need of perfection).

When engaging in meta-coded boundary work of this kind, differences within the institutional framework of the church were either accentuated or downplayed. This had a strong influence on the forms of interaction between the units of the church. At times, the only

relevant socio-religious boundary was perceived to be that separating the allegedly unified group church members from non-members. On other occasions, the existence of socio-religious boundaries internal to the church was brought into prominence so that interactions between different organisational units took the form of ecumenical co-operation across boundaries.

Micro-Level Boundary Work

It has been demonstrated time and again that religious practitioners within one and the same religious community cannot be presumed to share identical beliefs.[22] In most African-initiated churches in the Gwembe valley, which predominantly belong to the Pentecostal–charismatic spectrum of Christianity, this has to do with the social composition of the congregations at any point in time. There are patients seeking relief from an immediate affliction who are using the congregation's activities only temporarily during a more general quest for therapy. After successful healing, they are not pressured into continuing their involvement with the church. Yet if former patients decide to continue participating, they become members and are promised protection from illness henceforth. The church tries to provide this protection by, among other things, repeatedly bringing participants into closer contact with the Holy Spirit (*muya usalala*). If some of these participants later come to be seen as having acquired an outstanding relationship with *muya usalala*, they are considered to be potential intermediaries with divine powers. Having thus attained the status of religious leader, they are in a position to act with authority over the rest of the congregation, that is, patients and members.

Taken together, these different types of participants during ritual practice vary not only in respect of their expectations, previous religious experiences and status positions, but also in their knowledge of and familiarity with religious practice. What is more, there are marked differences in terms of their spirituality, that is, in the question of whether they are said to be close to the Holy Spirit or rather under the influence of demons.

Concerning the socio-religious boundary work undertaken within a given congregation, one therefore finds two constellations. On the one hand, there are situations when the congregation is perceived, experienced and/or performed as an internally more or less unified community in contradistinction to the outside world, the latter then being said to constitute the source or site of evil that threatens the integrity of the congregation. On the other hand, there are situations during a ritual practice when two groups of participants are distinguished from each other, namely patients and non-patients. The boundary between these groups is most visible during healing and in divinatory sessions, that is, when the church leaders and ordinary members of the congregation take spiritual care of people who are assumed to be affected by satanic forces.

The meta-coded dynamics of boundary work on the congregational micro-level thus share many features with those on the meso-level described above. Those present during ritual interactions can variously be labelled 'non-Christians', 'Christians' or 'real Christians'. Depending on this labelling, internal socio-religious boundaries can be emphasised or de-emphasised. When they are emphasised, as during divination and in healing sessions, congregations are internally divided into two groupings, patients (non-members) and non-patients (members and leaders), so that religious interaction unfolds across a socio-religious boundary that is perceived to be meaningful.

Interim Conclusions

The levels of religious interaction explored above all involve a form of boundary work that recalls Barth's idea of boundary-making and Gal's concept of fractal recursion. What is being discursively repositioned through this practice is the boundary dividing the 'inside' from the 'outside' of socio-religious commonality. The people in any given 'inside' are construed as

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22 J. Fernandez, 'Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformative Cult', *American Anthropologist*, 67, 4 (1965), pp. 902–29; see also Kirsch, 'Restaging the Will to Believe'.

sharing more religious repertoires among themselves than with people on the 'outside'. As a consequence, since socio-religious boundaries within any given 'inside' are declared irrelevant, there is also no need to act ecumenically – that is, across boundaries – within its bounds. Shifting the socio-religious boundary separating the 'inside' from the 'outside' outwards can serve as a strategy of a form of socio-religious inclusion by which boundaries previously deemed meaningful are rendered inconsequential. This is most noteworthy in the case of interdenominational co-operation (the macro-level). On the other hand, shifting the boundary inwards turns ecumenism into a practice *within* religious communities, irrespective of whether they have the institutional form of churches (the meso-level) or congregations (the micro-level).

Practising ecumenism through boundary work can go beyond the use of meta-codes to demarcate socio-religious commonalities and differences in the realm of humans. As I demonstrate in what follows, the achievement of ecumenical reality effects also depends on the spiritual world.

Ecumenical Boundary Work in Socio-Spiritual Communities

One of the issues that captured my attention in my research on religion in Zambia is the question of how to deal epistemologically with the ontology of spiritual entities. In the history of the anthropology of religion in Africa, this has long been a contentious issue. Generally speaking, many scholars have followed Edward E. Evans-Pritchard's lead in pursuing a two-layered approach. On the one hand, they have argued that one can discern an intrinsic rationality in the discourses and practices relating to witchcraft *if* one provisionally takes their underlying premises into account. On the other hand, their analyses for the most part shared Evans-Pritchard's conviction that witches 'as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist'.[23] By contrast, scholars like Edith Turner, who criticised the tendency among anthropologists 'to rationalize away the native claim that spirits exist'[24] and instead attributed spirits an ontology and experiential reality in their own right, have remained a minority.

According to my understanding, this debate can be enriched by looking at the ways in which religious practitioners experience the reality of spiritual entities, at times making them a visibly embodied part of their religious practice. This approach allows us to study the formation of 'socio-spiritual communities' – that is, religious communities constituted by human beings and their interactions with what they experience as spiritual entities.[25]

In the remainder of this article, I argue that the formation of socio-spiritual communities is the outcome of an ongoing co-production in which the social composition and socio-spatial scale of a given religious community develop in relation to how the spiritual entities that are deemed to be relevant for that particular community are conceptualised and experienced in everyday life. I show that this process often has ecumenical reality effects, since religious practitioners not only take account of the agency of spiritual entities but are also determined to react to it and rearrange the boundaries within the socio-religious field accordingly. To understand how this works, it is necessary, first of all, to describe in ethnographic detail what characterises human–spirit interactions in the Gwembe valley.

Spirits in Talk, Spirits in Practice

In my fieldwork encounters, spiritual entities were a recurrent object of conversations between people as well as between myself and my interlocutors. In other words, they were represented

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23 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 18.

24 E. Turner, 'The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study', *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 4, 1 (1993), p. 9; see also E. Turner, *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

25 Kirsch, 'Intangible Motion'.

linguistically, for example, through identificatory acts of naming, by describing the ways in which they manifest themselves, or by explaining their specific characteristics.

On special occasions, however, spirits were also said to use human beings as their mouthpiece so as to communicate with religious practitioners, as in the case of prophetic utterances or glossolalia. This characterisation of spirits as the subject of linguistic acts was more challenging to comprehend and analyse because, as Webb Keane has asked in another thematic context:

> [i]f the agency of others is predicated in part on their own beliefs and on the notions of agency immanent in their practices, how are we, if, for example, we are secular scholars, to reconcile their attribution of agency to divine subjects with our desire that they recognize that agency lies within their own hands?[26]

But even more generally, for most people in my area of research, spiritual entities were not merely an artefact of human imagination and representation, but autonomous 'actants' who make themselves present in the world in different ways, most obviously when perceptibly manifesting themselves during spirit possession or states of trance.[27]

Given the varied and historically changing pantheon of spiritual entities in this region, we can assume that the linguistic and non-linguistic registers used by social actors to refer to the spiritual world and those attributed to the autonomous agency of spirits stand in a tightly interwoven dialectical relationship with each other.[28] The humanly embodied manifestations of spiritual entities give rise to particular ways of characterising the latter in social discourse. In turn, previous experiences with and interpretations of spiritual entities as reflected in this discourse and as culminating in people's 'memory traces'[29] are then taken as precedents when encountering new instances of spiritual manifestations and categorising them into different classes of spirits (for example, 'ancestral spirits'; *masabe* possession cult spirits). In this way, the recursive dialectics involved in this process exhibit features of what the sociologist Anthony Giddens has called 'the duality of structure'.[30] In the context of the present article, this means that the classificatory structure of the spiritual world 'is both medium and outcome of reproduction of practices'.[31]

Spiritual Insecurity as a Side Effect of Schismatic Dynamics

This does not mean that determining the identity of a spirit that manifests itself is self-explanatory and an easy task. Quite the contrary – religious life is permeated by what Adam Ashforth has called 'spiritual insecurity', by which he means

> an existential condition marked by epistemic anxiety produced by ignorance of, uncertainty about, and/or disagreement among relevant authorities over the proper and effective modes of managing relations with agencies deemed capable of causing harm as well as those deemed responsible for the subject's safety and well-being. It is produced by crises in interpretive authority … In such circumstances people experiencing harm often face choices among conflicting authorities invoking

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26 W. Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007), p. 196; see also T.G. Kirsch, 'From the Spirit's Point of View: Ethnography, Total Truth and Speakership', in K. Kumoll and O. Zenker (eds), *Beyond Writing Culture: Current Intersections of Epistemologies and Representational Practices* (Oxford, Berghahn, 2010), pp. 89–112.

27 My use of the word 'actant' follows Bruno Latour's definition of this term. For Latour, actants are anything that '*modif*[ies] *other actors through a series of*' actions (italics in original). See B. Latour, *Politics of Nature* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 75.

28 See also E. Colson, *Tonga Religious Life*.

29 A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984), p. 377.

30 A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979), p. 69.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

powers rooted in radically different religious traditions, modes of ritual practice, and incompatible epistemologies.[32]

When seen from a wider perspective, the prevalence of this spiritual insecurity in the area of my research is a by-product of the schismatic dynamics, pluralistic nature and competitiveness that characterise the religious field in this region. Christian communities differ not only in their theological outlook and the specifics of their religious practices, but also in how they relate to spiritual entities, as well as, most importantly, in whom they acknowledge to be a legitimate – that is, divinely ordained – intermediary between the human and the spiritual world. One of the striking aspects in this context is that the reasons given for schisms within the field of African-initiated churches for the most part refer less to theological arguments or the specificities of ritual practice than to the alleged lack of divinely ordained spiritual power in the church from which certain members had split off. This also means that schisms regularly involve public statements according to which the very nature of the spiritual entities that manifested themselves in the previous church is re-interpreted, in most cases implying a meta-coded reclassification of them from being seen as 'Christian' (see above) and benevolent to being ascribed demonic qualities. Taken at large, the competitiveness within this volatile religious field thus functions like a catalyst that time and again generates new spiritual insecurities by deconstructing the claims of other religious communities and thus produces a general atmosphere of scepticism.

Spiritual Insecurity as an Unintended Consequence of Harmony Ideology

At the same time, people in the area of my research are usually at pains to keep conflicts and hostilities at bay, thus subscribing to a version of what Laura Nader has called 'harmony ideology'.[33] During everyday interactions, people usually keep a low profile, doing their best to avoid arguments either by staying clear of delicate issues or by striving to come up with something approaching a minimum consensus. This conflict-averse attitude, which can be observed in both religious and non-religious contexts, reflects people's fears that unchecked controversies easily escalate into irreconcilable or even violent confrontations. In other words, one finds a 'tough-minded determination [among Gwembe Tonga] that keeps hostilities from surfacing and disturbing the business of living'.[34]

For religious practitioners, this tendency to seek consensus means finding compromises that bridge the differences of opinion with which people from different socio-religious backgrounds enter into interaction. This does not happen just once: due to their great affiliational mobility, religious practitioners try to achieve consensus not just in one interactional setting, but successively in different constellations of religious interaction involving different social actors from different backgrounds.[35] Accordingly, the compromises required for achieving at least a minimum consensus vary considerably. What was a viable compromise in one interactional setting might not be an option in another.

Viewed from the perspective of the religious practitioners involved, this configuration demands a considerable degree of flexibility from them all. Truth is always relative, and the quest for a temporary consensus is mostly given priority over dogmatism and consistency over time. It would therefore not be an exaggeration to say that my interlocutors in Zambia are constantly navigating through a religious landscape of 'possible worlds'. It is an unintended consequence of these harmony-seeking dynamics that the spiritual securities gained by a

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32 A. Ashforth, 'AIDS, Religious Enthusiasm and Spiritual Insecurity in Africa', *Global Public Health*, 6, 2 (2011), pp. 132–47.
33 L. Nader, *Harmony Ideology: Justice and Control in a Zapotec Mountain Village* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990); see also T.G. Kirsch, 'Discordance through Consensus: Unintended Consequences of the Quest for Consensuality in Zambian Religious Life', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 5 (2014), pp. 1015–30.
34 E. Colson, *Tradition and Contract: The Problem of Order* (London, Aldine, 1974), p. 44.
35 Kirsch, 'Discordance through Consensus'.

given religious practitioner at a particular point are undermined on other occasions, producing inconsistencies over time and giving rise to the constant need for situated reorientations.

Contacting the Spiritual World in a Process of Trial and Error

The experience of spiritual insecurity also feeds into how the phenomenon of spirit possession is dealt with. As mentioned above, there is a pronounced ambiguity and negotiability concerning the classification of spirits by those going through spirit possession, as well as those witnessing it or managing it.[36]

In the case of afflictions through spirit possession, the lack of certainty is usually overcome by successively invoking a variety of spirits that are thought to be potentially responsible for the affliction, the cause of which has to be revealed by a system of trial and error. For example, during appeals to ancestors (*mizimu*), the responsible family member addresses a number of ancestors and asks them for help. If the afflicted individual recovers after this invocation, it is assumed that the afflicting spirit, or at least an ancestral spirit capable of serving as an intermediary with the latter, must have been among the uttered names.[37] Then again, there are *masabe* spirits that represent, for example, alien humanity, foreign cultural practices and technologies, and the wild. Disclosing the causes of afflictions in *masabe* cults involves intoning songs under the guidance of a religious expert, because each *masabe* is assumed to have its own particular song. The effort to find out which *masabe* is afflicting a patient thus entails playing different *masabe* songs. If the patient manifestly reacts to the song by dancing or other bodily signs, the identity of the spirit can be inferred by the religious experts and adequate measures taken.[38]

The Collective Identities of Spirits

Yet, despite the practical difficulties in determining the identity of a spirit, as described above, once its identity is confirmed, religious practitioners normally do not doubt the internal coherence and consistency of the spirit's identity. In other words, though people normally find it difficult to make sense of spiritual manifestations, they never challenge the idea that each and every spiritual entity has certain essential characteristics that make up its unitary identity, even if its central traits are arbitrariness, moodiness and caprice.

What is more, as noted above, individual spiritual entities are grouped into types of spirit, each of which is assumed to have certain properties in common. For example, representing the 'perverted human order', the spirits categorised as *zyeelo* are said to have no message for the living, but to be purely malicious.[39] By contrast, the Holy Spirit (*muya usalala*) is presumed to be an essentially benevolent spiritual entity that can manifest itself in different ways and in different locations, occasionally even at the same time through self-multiplication.[40] Spiritual manifestations that those witnessing them consider to pertain to and promote the well-being

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36 Writing about Òrìṣà spirits in West Africa, Karin Barber, in 1990, made a similar point concerning the classificatory ambiguity of spiritual entities: '[e]ach one is assigned a definite personality. They are differentiated in exuberant and lavish detail … But the other side of the coin is a pervasive indeterminacy about their identity. They appear to exist in multiple and reduplicated forms; to have numerous manifestations …'; K. Barber, '"Oríkì", Women and the Proliferation and Merging of "òrìṣà"', *Africa*, 60, 3 (1990), p. 313. For a more recent study of religious pluralism in this region, see J.D.Y. Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Oriṣa Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2015).

37 See E. Colson, 'Ancestral Spirits and Social Structure among the Plateau Tonga', *International Archives of Ethnography*, 47, 1 (1954), pp. 21–68; E. Colson, *The Social Organisation of the Gwembe Tonga* (Manchester, Manchester University Press,1960), pp. 122–61.

38 See E. Colson, 'Spirit Possession among the Tonga of Zambia', in J. Beattie and J. Middleton (eds), *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 69–103; E. Colson, 'A Continuing Dialogue: Prophets and Local Shrines among the Tonga of Zambia', in R. Werbner (ed.), *Regional Cults* (London, Academic Press, 1977), pp. 119–39; Ute Luig, 'Gender Relations and Commercialization in Tonga Possession Cults', in M. Reh and G. Ludwar-Ene (eds), *Gender and Identity in Africa* (Münster, Lit-Verlag, 1995), pp. 33–49.

39 See Colson, 'Spirit Possession', p. 72.

40 Kirsch, 'Intangible Motion', pp. 45–7.

of individuals or the community at large are therefore often attributed to the Holy Spirit. This is also why there is often a blurred boundary between the category of the Holy Spirit and that of *masabe* spirits, which, when integrated into one's life, are likewise thought to provide protection against affliction. The same blurring can be observed in the case of Christian angels, since there has long been a spirit in the *masabe* pantheon which bears the vernacularised name of *mangelo* and is thought to share certain attributes with the former.

This attribution of collective identity traits to spiritual entities resembles the process described by Roy Wagner in his book *The Invention of Culture*.[41] According to Wagner, the ethnographer, when encountering an unfamiliar way of life, tries to make sense of his or her observations by piecing together seemingly unrelated events and elements into an abstract, inherently coherent whole, which is called 'culture':

> [t]he relation that the anthropologist builds between two cultures – which, in turn, objectifies and hence 'creates' those cultures for him – arises precisely from his act of 'invention,' his use of meanings known to him in constructing an understandable representation of his subject matter. The result is an analogy, or a set of analogies, that 'translates' one group of basic meanings into the other, and can be said to participate in both meaning systems at the same time in the same way that their creator does …[42]

I do not want to take this analogy too far, but there is a sense in which religious practitioners in Zambia engage in a very similar process. Making sense of spiritual manifestations involves the interpretive construction not only of the identity characteristics of individual spirits, but also of certain 'cultural' commonalities between them, which, in turn, allow religious practitioners to differentiate and group them into types of spirit, almost as if spirits belong to different ethnic groups, one of them called *masabe*, another one *basangu*, and yet another *zyeelo*.

The Formation of Socio-Religious Communities

At the same time, sense-making processes in relation to a given instance of spirit possession are co-productive of socio-religious community-building in two ways, both of which can produce ecumenical reality effects among religious practitioners who otherwise belong to different religious groupings.

First, they are based upon assumptions concerning the identity of the human possessed by the spirit – that is, its 'locus'.[43] For instance, it makes a difference whether a particular (type of) spiritual entity is said to manifest itself mainly in men or in women; whether certain types of spirit are believed to turn for preference towards certain sections of society, whether these be defined in terms of, for example, descent, occupation or place of residence; or whether there are certain experiences, situations or conditions of life that are presumed to predestine people 'naturally' to be affected by this particular (type of) spirit.

Secondly, what is important for religious practitioners' attempts to determine the identity of a spirit manifesting itself is its 'focus', that is, the entity or realm(s) of sociality for which this spiritual manifestation is assumed to be of relevance. I am referring here to both 'entities' and 'realm(s)' in order to capture two different claims to relevance. On the one hand, a given instance of spirit possession can be said to be relevant for a distinct group of people. In these cases, a spiritual entity uses its human host to communicate with people either by directly addressing specific individuals or by sending messages to a named group of people. On the other hand, a case of spirit possession can be said to have relevance for people in the wider social context of where it occurs. These are cases where a spiritual entity communicates with humans without expressly specifying the audience being addressed in the message, which the witnesses to the possession consequently have to work out for themselves.

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41 R. Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980).
42 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
43 See also Kirsch, 'Spirit Idioms'.

Taken together, the act of attributing an identity to a spiritual entity manifesting itself is therefore co-productive of a real or imagined socio-religious community for which this particular spirit is said to be at least of temporary relevance and/or is thought to be 'in charge' of dealing with it. These communities take different forms, ranging from institutionalised Christian churches to informal social gatherings called together to address a specific problem.

Socio-Spiritual Ecumenism

Briefly summarising my ethnographic analysis so far, we have seen that, while spirits are experienced as having a strong influence on people's lives, there is also a feeling of spiritual insecurity in those people that gives rise to constant (re)interpretations and endeavours to determine the identity of spirits and assess their relationship to the world of humans. Furthermore, spiritual manifestations are categorised and grouped together into different types of spirit, each of which is said to have collective characteristics, for example, in how they affect humans. In turn – and most important for my argument here – by becoming the 'locus' and/or the 'focus' of spiritual agency, human actors are interpellated into religious socialities of different shapes and scales, that is, into socio-spiritual communities that come into existence either for a longer period of time or only temporarily through people's reference to the agency of particular (sets of) spiritual entities.

There are two different forms of ecumenical practice involved here. First, in certain constellations, religious practitioners' interactions with spiritual entities have the purpose of enticing the latter into an ecumenical relationship of spirit–human co-operation, as in *masabe* possession cults or with regard to the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal–charismatic churches. Secondly, the classificatory boundary work pertaining to the different types of spirit is paralleled in systematic ways by socio-religious boundary work in the human realm. In other words, the act of identifying the 'locus' and 'focus' of a given spiritual manifestation brings religious socialities into being that often have no reality prior to this act. For instance, in the case of an affliction attributed to the malicious workings of a spiritual entity, the quest for healing often urges relatives, neighbours and others relevant to the afflicted person to co-operate religiously who, in other circumstances, would not do so. In this way, spiritual agency gives rise to ecumenical reality effects in the socio-religious realm.

Drawing Things Together

In this article, I have used my research findings from southern Zambia to argue that ecumenism means more than interaction and co-operation across pre-existing and stable socio-religious boundaries. Exploring the dynamics of boundary work and meta-coding in a plural religious field, I suggested in the first part of this article that ecumenical reality effects can be produced by discursively shifting socio-religious boundaries in order to make them more inclusive and, as a consequence, let them override and make irrelevant institutionalised differences in religious outlook and practices that are otherwise deemed to be of significance.

I have shown that this is achieved through practices of meta-coding that differentiate between 'non-Christians', 'Christians' and 'real Christians' and can be found on different levels: the macro-level of interdenominational co-operation, the meso-level of inter-congregational interaction, and the micro-level of what happens within congregations. The interesting point here is that these categorical distinctions remain the same on all levels, thus following the logic of fractal recursivity.

In the second part of the article, I drew attention to the complex ways in which human–spirit interactions give rise to the formation of socio-spiritual communities and to what I call 'ecumenical reality effects'. Recurrent acts of identifying and classifying spiritual manifestations are correlated by social processes through which religious practitioners are

persuaded to join ecumenical socialities consisting of people who, in other contexts, would not co-operate religiously with each other.

Both mechanisms have in common the fact that they are a means temporarily to suspend awareness of the existence of socio-religious boundaries. As such, they follow a principle of encompassment known from many other fields of socio-cultural life, such as the widespread slogan 'unity in diversity'. Exploring mechanisms like these can help us come to a better understanding of the practice of ecumenism, one that does not presuppose the prior existence of institutional boundaries but that does justice to the complexities of the boundary work involved.

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