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Discordance Through Consensus: Unintended Consequences of the Quest for Consensuality in Zambian Religious Life

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This article takes the example of religion in Zambia, and more particularly African-initiated Christianity, to explore how people in the Gwembe valley deal with differences in religious outlook and practice. Present-day religious practices in the Gwembe valley are pluralist, dynamic and characterised by blurred boundaries that are re-negotiated according to context and situation. Yet this religious pluralism only rarely leads to open conflicts because people tend to keep a low profile during everyday interactions between members of different religious communities, doing their best to avoid arguments either by staying clear of delicate issues or by striving to come up with a minimum consensus. At the same time, when focusing on what in particular is consented to from a more abstract point of view, it becomes clear that there are marked contradictions to the consensuses reached, even when the ethnographer follows one and the same person through a sequence of interactions with different participants. Thus, in contrast to Max Gluckman's famous remark that 'conflicts in one set of relationships, over a wider range of society or through a longer period of time, lead to the re-establishment of social cohesion', it is the stress on consensuality on the micro-social level that produces discordance on the macro level of sociality.

Introduction

This article takes the example of African-initiated Christianity among Tonga people in Zambia's Gwembe valley to explore from an anthropological point of view how people in this region deal with differences in religious outlook and practice.[1] This focus allows interesting insights to be acquired regarding a socio-religious configuration that counters the conventional yet questionable idea that religious differences automatically lead to interpersonal conflicts.

As will be shown, present-day religious practices in the Gwembe valley are dynamic, in constant flux and characterised by blurred boundaries that time and again are re-negotiated according to context and situation.[2] Moreover, as with many other aspects of social life in this predominantly rural region for example, people's political affiliations and residential rules 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 open many possibilities in terms of what they consider plausible religious truths or viable religious practices. At the same time, however, the

1 See also E. Colson, *The Social Organisation of the Gwembe Tonga* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1960); E. Colson, *The Social Consequences of Resettlement* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1971); E. Colson, *Tonga Religious Life in the Twentieth Century* (Lusaka, Bookworld Publishers, 2006), pp. 233 65; T. Scudder, *The Ecology of the Gwembe Tonga* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1962).
2 See also T.G. Kirsch, *Spirits and Letters: Reading, Writing and Charisma in African Christianity* (Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2008), pp. 105 15.

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pluralism and competitiveness resulting from this self-determined and on the whole quite pragmatic approach to religious matters only rarely leads to open conflicts. Of course, one finds uncompromising truth claims being made by religious experts, especially the leaders of Pentecostal charismatic churches, concerning the divinely ordained nature of their own mission and the alleged mendacity and erroneousness of other religious communities.[3] Yet, as I came to learn during fieldwork, such bold claims are usually made only in the absence of those who are belittled and criticised. By contrast, during everyday encounters and interactions between members of different religious communities, 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-preventive approach, which is also a notable feature of non-religious contexts, partly reflects people's experiences that unchecked controversies easily escalate into violence, especially when the antagonists are under the influence of alcohol. Broadly speaking among Gwembe Tonga, there is, in Elizabeth Colson's words, a 'tough-minded determination that keeps hostilities from surfacing and disturbing the business of living'.[4]

Taken together, these two dimensions add up to a perplexing socio-religious configuration that becomes visible for the ethnographer when conducting participant observation of day-to-day life in the Gwembe valley. On the one hand, the researcher encounters a great diversity of religious discourses and practices that are ostensibly inconsistent with each other and in part even contradict each other, though they may be invoked by one and the same person if it is thought fit to do so. On the other hand, during interactions with other religious practitioners, these inconsistencies and contradictions normally do not play a role since people usually reach a minimum consensus. To put it another way, the ethnographer of present-day religious life in the Gwembe valley is faced with a multiplicity of socio-religious interactions, most of which culminate in a conflict-preventive consensus by the participants. At the same time, when focusing analytically on what in particular is consented to from a more abstract point of view, it becomes clear that there are marked contradictions to the consensuses reached, even when the ethnographer follows one and the same person through a sequence of interactions with different participants.

This article seeks to explain this puzzling socio-religious configuration.[5] Following Georg Simmel's advice to conceptualise social relationships dualistically with both 'concord, harmony, mutuality [and] distance, competition, repulsion [playing an important role in producing] the actual configuration of society',[6] I develop some thoughts on consensuality as social practice. More particularly, I take the methodologies of the so-called 'Manchester school' of social anthropology as an applicable inspiration, and African-initiated Christianity

3 See also B. Meyer, '"Make a Complete Break with the Past": Memory and Post Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28, 3 (1998), pp. 316 49; E. Colson, 'Converts and Tradition: The Impact of Christianity on Valley Tonga Religion', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 26, 2 (1970), pp. 143 56.

4 E. Colson, *Tradition and Contract: The Problem of Order* (London, Aldine, 1974), p. 44. I would like to strongly emphasise that the argument developed in this article is in no way intended to play down the past and present existence of disagreements, conflicts and (sometimes violent) confrontations in the area of my research. Like Colson, who throughout her work on the Tonga has documented many instances and lines of conflict, much of my own research has explored how people in southern Zambia navigate through potentially and/or actually conflict ridden terrains of socio religious interaction. With that said, the present text focuses on a particularly widespread strategy used to avoid open confrontation while of course acknowledging that other strategies, such as schismatic practices, exist.

5 In a previous version, this article has been discussed at the 'Narratives of Nationhood Conference' in Lusaka, Zambia, in September 2012. I would like to thank the organisers and the participants of this conference. Many thanks also to Elizabeth Colson, Miles Larmer, Frank Oberzaucher, Lyn Schumaker, Rijk van Dijk, Cordula Weißköppel, Richard Werbner and the participants of the Satterthwaite Colloquium (2012), and those of the Anthropology Seminar Series at the University of Konstanz, for providing helpful comments.

6 G. Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', *American Journal of Sociology*, 11, 4 (1906), p. 448.

in southern Zambia as the empirical example, in order to examine ethnographically the 'changing events, situations, and (social) relationships' involved in the socio-cultural construction of 'consensus'.[7]

In order to do so, I distinguish between two different perspectives on my ethnographic material, one of them ('micro') referring to situated social interactions in the sense of Gluckman's 'social situation',[8] and the other ('macro') having reference to a more abstractive and comprehensive perspective on interlinked yet temporarily protracted sequences of social situations in the form of 'extended case-studies'.[9]

The conclusion of my analysis is that, seemingly paradoxically, a stress on consensuality on the micro-social level produces discordance on the macro level of sociality. This finding turns Max Gluckman's famous dictum that 'conflicts in one set of relationships, over a wider range of society or through a longer period of time, lead to the re-establishment of social cohesion' on its head.[10] By foregrounding the existence of unintended consequences of people's quest for consensuality, the analysis presented here not only provides new empirical insights into socio-religious life in Zambia, but also aims at contributing to social theory.

The article first outlines how 'conflict' and 'dissensuality' have been discussed in early social scientific research in Zambia, particularly in studies of African Christianity. Then, having developed some conceptual thoughts on 'consensuality', a brief introduction to the religious field in the Gwembe valley is given, before Manchester school methodologies are practically applied to two ethnographic cases in order to exemplify the argument presented above.

Conflict and Dissent

The early history of social scientific research in Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia) is intricately connected to the work of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute (RLI), which after its founding in 1937 was located initially in Livingstone and then in Lusaka, and to ethnographic research by what later came to be known as the 'Manchester school' of social anthropology.[11] Formulated in more or less explicit opposition to previously dominant approaches in structural functionalism, which stressed peaceable social equilibrium and spatially bounded socio-cultural units ('tribes'), the Manchester school's many theoretical and methodological innovations 'gave theoretical force to such concepts as, to cite a few among the many, the social field, situational analysis, perpetual succession, intercalary roles, situational selection, cross-cutting ties, the dominant cleavage, redressive ritual, repetitive and changing social systems, processional form, processual change'.[12]

The research programmes of the RLI and the Manchester school must be understood against the backdrop of the momentous historical juncture in southern Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, as expressed in Gluckman's succinct statement of 1945 that it is 'industrialization with labour migration which dominates the whole trend of social

7 T.M.S. Evens and D. Handelman, 'Introduction: The Ethnographic Praxis of the Theory of Practice', in T.M.S. Evens and D. Handelman (eds), *The Manchester School: Practice and Ethnographic Praxis in Anthropology* (Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2006), p. ix.

8 M. Gluckman, 'Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand', *Bantu Studies*, 14, 1 (1940), pp. 147 74.

9 J. Velsen, 'The Extended Case Method and Situational Analysis', in A. Epstein (ed.), *The Craft of Social Anthropology* (London, Tavistock, 1967), pp. 29 53.

10 Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, p. 2.

11 See L. Schumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology: Fieldwork, Networks, and the Making of Cultural Knowledge in Central Africa* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2001); Evens and Handelman (eds), *The Manchester School*; A. Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists* (London, Routledge, 1996), pp. 142 66; R. Werbner, 'The Manchester School in South Central Africa', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13 (1984), pp. 157 85.

12 Werbner, 'The Manchester School in South Central Africa', p. 157.

developments' in this region.[13] Gluckman concurred with the British colonial administration that social scientists should, among other things, analyse the

> effect of migratory labour system in rural areas; degree and effect of stabilization or urbanization of labour; intermingling of tribes at labour centres ... tendential effect on local customs; division of labour effect of existing or potential labour saving devices on division of labour between sexes or portions of a community'.[14]

It was pressing issues like these which endowed research by the RLI and Manchester anthropologists with a sense of urgency and which stimulated the critical interrogation of some conventional anthropological ideas of that time. Moreover, Manchester anthropologists were deeply interested in bringing out what Burawoy identifies as 'discrepancies between normative prescriptions and everyday practices discrepancies they traced to internal contradictions but also to the intrusion of colonialism'.[15]

Of these contributions, most which were made on the basis of empirical research in Northern Rhodesia and which 'valued both the theorizing and the ethnographic presentation of fieldwork materials',[16] one of the most momentous is their analyses of conflicts and conflict resolution. For example, in Victor Turner's landmark study *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, first published in 1957, the analysis focuses on the dynamics of social conflicts in the Ndembu villages where one finds an inherent contradiction between the principles of matrilineality and virilocality. Paying close attention to 'situations of crisis, which arise periodically in village life', Turner explores the socio-structural form of this contradiction as well as the regularities of the social processes, or what he referred to as 'social drama', by which these crises are resolved within a given village community, leading to either reintegration or the recognition of schism.[17]

This analytical focus owes much to the work of Gluckman, the South African founder of the Manchester school. According to Gluckman, conflicts do not necessarily have purely disruptive effects but can also lead to certain forms of social integration.[18] At the same time, as was also pointed out by Colson for the Tonga in southern Zambia, 'A man's several loyalties strike at the strength of his loyalty to any one group or set of relationships, which is thus divided. Hence the whole system depends for its cohesion on the existence of conflicts in smaller sub-systems'.[19] Even though this theoretical approach has subsequently been criticised, through the concept of cross-cutting alliances and the socially integrative role of conflicts, as well as its interests in conflict dynamics, dispute settlement and conflict resolution, the Manchester school has become a leading contributor to conflict theory.[20]

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13 M. Gluckman, 'The Seven Year Research Plan of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute', *Journal of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute*, 4 (1945), pp. 1 32. In this document, Gluckman (then director of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute [RLI]) outlined his plans for research on the territory of Northern Rhodesia to be undertaken by members of the RLI in the years to come. The RLI was in part funded by the colonial administration to enable research on the rapid social transformations characterising the colonial era in this region.

14 Quoted in Gluckman, 'The Seven Year Research Plan of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute', p. 7.

15 M. Burawoy, *The Extended Case Method* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009), p. 22.

16 Evens and Handelman (eds), *The Manchester School*, p. ix.

17 V. Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1957), p. xxv, 91 4.

18 M. Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1955), p. 2.

19 Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, pp. 19 20; see also M. Gluckman, *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society* (New York, The New American Library, 1965), pp. 121 45. See also E. Colson, 'Social Control and Vengance in Plateau Tonga Society', *Africa*, 23, 3 (1953), pp. 199 211.

20 For example, Colson, 'Social Control and Vengance in Plateau Tonga Society'; A.L. Epstein, *Politics in an Urban African Community* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1958); M. Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South East Africa* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1954); Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa*; M. Gluckman, *The Judical Process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1955); J.C. Mitchell, *The Yao Village* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1956); Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*; J. van Velsen, *The Politics of Kinship: A Study in Social Manipulation among the Lakeside Tonga of Nyasaland* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1964).

But there is also another strand to this scholarly tradition that proved influential for social scientific research in Zambia, which is closely related to the empirical subject matter dealt with in the present article. Zambia has been a prominent site of anthropological and historical research on new religious movements, most particularly African Christianity. Borrowing the Manchester anthropologists' keen awareness of the social problems and transformations triggered by colonialism and the integration of African societies into capitalist money economies, industrialisation, wage labour and labour migration, the emergence of new religious movements was here largely construed as a repercussion of radical socio-economic changes, a symbolic expression of people's attempts to cope with them and/or a proto-political way of organising subaltern protest.

For example, studies of the Watchtower movement in Northern Rhodesia highlighted the tensions and conflicts associated with its emergence, some of which culminated in intra-societal violence, while at the same time being suspected by the British colonial administration of serving as a veil for anti-imperialist sentiments and rhetoric.[21] Interpretations of African Christianity in Northern Rhodesia as protest movements were not, however, confined to the colonial era: following the deadly clashes in 1964 in Zambia's Northern Province between prophetess Alice Lenshina's Lumpa Church and members of Kenneth Kaunda's UNIP, conflicts between religious movements and political elites did not end with political independence.[22]

From research on African-initiated churches in the 1940s up to recent studies such as Derek Peterson's *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent*, many analyses of African Christianity in Zambia and elsewhere on the African continent have subscribed to a 'paradigm of dissensuality'.[23] Broadly speaking, this utilises an analytical framework composed of two polar opposites 'power' and 'resistance'. For example, use of this framework of analysis is reflected in the fact that African-initiated churches have long been labelled 'independent churches', thus emphasising that they were the outcome of contentious schismatic processes from historical mission churches.[24] What is more, taking these churches to be 'religions of the oppressed',[25] this approach has either emphasised their role in articulating and activating resistance or, on the contrary, in providing legitimacy for escapist socio-religious utopias. In both versions, the starting point of analysis is actual or potential conflict, as is exemplified in more recent work that deals with the emphasis in

21 S. Cross, 'The Watchtower Movement in Southern Central Africa, 1908 1945' (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1977); R. Henkel, *Christian Missions in Africa: A Social Geographical Study of the Impact of their Activities in Zambia* (Berlin, Reimer, 1989), pp. 83 6; J.R. Hooker, 'Witnesses and Watchtower in the Rhodesias and Nyasaland', *Journal of African History*, 6, 1 (1965), pp. 91 106; T.O. Ranger, 'The Mwana Lesa movement of 1925', in T.O. Ranger and J. Weller (eds), *Themes in Christian History of Central Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1975), pp. 45 75; K.E. Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985).

22 See also G.C. Bond, 'A Prophecy that Failed: The Lumpa Church of Uyombe, Zambia', in G.C. Bond, W.R. Johnson and S.S. Walker (eds), *African Christianity* (New York, Academic Press, 1979), pp. 137 67; H. Hinfelaar, 'Women's Revolt: The Lumpa Church of Lenshina Mulenga in the 1950s', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 21, 2 (1991), pp. 99 129; A.D. Roberts, *The Lumpa Church of Alice Lenshina* (Lusaka, Oxford University Press, 1970); W.M. van Binsbergen, *Religious Change in Zambia* (London, Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 266 316; for a reassessment, see D. Gordon, 'Rebellion or Massacre? The UNIP Lumpa Conflict Revisited', in J B. Gewald, M. Hinfelaar and G. Macola (eds), *One Zambia, Many Histories*, (Leiden, Brill, 2009), pp. 45 76.

23 D.R. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935 1972* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012).

24 B. Meyer, 'Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal Charismatic Churches', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (2004), pp. 447 74.

25 V. Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

Pentecostal Christianity in Africa to, in the words of Birgit Meyer's renowned article, 'make a complete break with the past'.[26]

Compared to the situation in the mid twentieth century, when most of the empirical research discussed above was undertaken, Zambia has seen many changes. Some of the same social problems for example, those associated with labour migration continue to pose challenges. Over time, however, several of the issues that were previously perceived to be highly problematic, such as urbanisation or what was formerly called 'detribalisation', have undergone a process of (relative) normalisation, with the focus turning to more pressing issues, such as HIV/AIDS. Thus, broadly speaking, at the time of my ethnographic fieldwork from the mid 1990s to the early 2000s, the social, political and economic situation in Zambia differed substantially from that facing the RLI and the Manchester school. For example, the ongoing effects of economic decline meant that people in the Gwembe valley, as elsewhere in Zambia, had to remain flexible in their everyday struggles to make a living. In addition, following the introduction of multi-party politics in the early 1990s, market liberalisation and the increasing influx of new religious communities, most particularly transnational Pentecostal denominations, introduced a competitive market logic to non-economic domains of life. This resulted in an amplification in what people could choose from in terms of, for example, commodities (if they can afford to purchase them), political orientation and religious offerings.

Conceptualising Consensuality

I do not intend to query the analytical usefulness and, in many cases, the empirical adequacy of taking 'conflict' as the basic starting point for the analysis of African Christianity in Zambia and elsewhere. In fact, the ethnographic cases discussed below are all deeply embedded in actual or potential conflicts. Nevertheless, this article does not focus first and foremost on people's actual or potential dissent, but on their idealist desires and practical attempts to consent with each other.[27] The conventional emphasis on conflicts and African Christian expressions of dissent runs the danger of burying another insight of the Manchester anthropologists, namely the existence of socio-cultural mechanisms and registers that prevent the occurrence of conflicts. Colson, for example, summarised an important finding of her long-term fieldwork among the Tonga in southern Zambia as follows:

> The Tonga stress the importance of personal restraint in the interest of avoiding any possibility of raising hackles. They attempt to sidestep issues, are reluctant to allow their fellows to drag them

26 Meyer, 'Make a Complete Break with the Past'; see also J. Robbins, 'Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity', *Current Anthropology*, 48, 1 (2007), pp. 5 38. More recently, there have been important reminders that 'breaking with the past as articulated discursively (in Pentecostal charismatic Christianity) is an impossibility in practice' (M. Engelke, 'Past Pentecostalism: Notes on Rupture, Realignment, and Everyday Life in Pentecostal and African Independent Churches', *Africa* 80, 2 [2010], p. 177) and that 'breaking with the past is not only the erasure of a tradition but the inscription of another' (Engelke, 'Past Pentecostalism', p. 179). Thus, studies of 'Pentecostal sociality' (N. Haynes, 'Pentecostalism and the Morality of Money: Prosperity, Inequality, and Religious Sociality on the Zambian Copperbelt', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18, 1 [2012], pp. 123 39) were able to demonstrate that the language of 'rupture' does not automatically and necessarily prevent members of Pentecostal charismatic churches from socialising with non converted persons and from remaining embedded in family relationships (see, for example, M. Lindhardt, 'If You Are Saved You Cannot Forget Your Parents: Agency, Power, and Social Repositioning in Tanzanian Born Again Christianity', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 40, 3 [2010], pp. 240 72).

27 An important early study of the quest for consensuality in African Christianity is Benetta Jules Rosette's 'Grass Roots Ecumenism: Religious and Social Co operation in Two Urban African Churches', *African Social Research*, 23 (1977), pp. 185 216, whose main focus differs from the analysis pursued here by concentrating on interactions between religious *institutions*.

> into a dispute, and try to vanish from the scene if those in their vicinity seem intent on pursuing a quarrel. Or close supporters, who inevitably will be identified with the combatants, attempt to restrain them, taking from their hands any weapons or tools which can be used for injury, applying gentle pressure, and murmuring soothing words about the advisability of cooling the combat for the moment. They do not want to take sides and be faced with the consequences of a formal breach with those whom they must continue to encounter within a relatively restricted range nor do they want to draw upon themselves the anger of a vengeful person.[28]

In what follows, I will take this remark which reflects much of what I have experienced among the Gwembe Tonga since the mid 1990s as a point of departure for exploring 'consensuality' as socio-cultural practice among Christians in southern Zambia.

However, before embarking on the analysis of my ethnographic data, it is essential to reflect on the concept of 'consensuality'. After all, as James Fernandez cautioned some time ago, 'beyond the raising of hands or some other significant statement of allegiance and cohesion, do we really understand what is taking place in acts of consensus?'[29] It is worthwhile starting with what legal anthropologist Laura Nader has called 'harmony ideology', that is, social actors' 'emphasis on conciliation, [and their] recognition that resolution of conflict is inherently good and that its reverse continued conflict or controversy is bad or dysfunctional'.[30] Much of what Colson has noted for the Tonga, and of what characterises the socio-religious field in my research in present-day Zambia, is compatible with this definition.[31]

In Africanist anthropology, processes of building consensus have been addressed especially by William Murphy, who explores the language and logic of consensus as a discourse and political strategy among the Mende in Sierra Leone. Using Goffmanesque terminology, Murphy finds that there is a dialectical relationship between 'frontstage' meetings of social actors, where consensual norms are invoked, and 'backstage' commentaries that expose 'the apparent consensus and unity as a skillfully managed illusion'.[32] Use of harmony ideology as a political strategy is also at the centre of Laurel Rose's *The Politics of Harmony*.[33] Since land disputes in Swaziland

> could easily be construed by critics as indications that customary land tenure was not working and should be replaced by freehold tenure ... Swazi rulers effectively used harmony ideologies in public rhetoric to disguise the disruptiveness of land disputes for individuals and groups and to promote an image of unity.[34]

Yet, while these are important observations that need to be taken into account in the ethnographic analysis below, we must also interrogate the word 'consensus' more fundamentally. To do so, it is helpful to recapitulate an important point made by Anthony Cohen, who suggests that the members of a community share symbols but not necessarily the meanings of these symbols:

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28 Colson, *Tradition and Contract*, p. 39. A similar attitude has been observed among Bemba speaking people in north east Zambia who, according to Audrey Richards' fieldwork in the 1930s, 'admire ... the avoidance of quarrels, unpleasantness and "scenes" which might disturb the delicate balance of village relations' (A. Richards, *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia* [London, Routledge, 1982], p. 47).

29 J. Fernandez, 'Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformative Cult', *American Anthropologist*, 67, 4 (1965), p. 902.

30 L. Nader, *Harmony Ideology: Justice and Control in a Zapotec Mountain Village* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 2.

31 In contrast to Nader, who traces 'harmony ideology' among the Zapotec population in Mexico to the influence of mission Christianity, there are good reasons to assume that 'the interest of avoiding any possibility of raising hackles' was also characteristic for the pre colonial Tonga (Elizabeth Colson, personal communication).

32 W.P. Murphy, 'Creating the Appearance of Consensus in Mende Political Discourse', *American Anthropologist*, 92, 1 (1990), p. 25.

33 L.L. Rose, *The Politics of Harmony: Land Dispute Strategies in Swaziland* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

34 Rose, *The Politics of Harmony*, p. 4.

> Symbols are effective because they are imprecise. . . . They are, therefore, ideal media through which people can speak a 'common' language, behave in apparently similar ways, participate in the 'same' rituals, pray to the 'same' gods, wear similar clothes, and so forth, without subordinating themselves to a tyranny of orthodoxy. Individuality and commonality are thus reconcilable. [The] . . . symbolic repertoire of a community aggregates the . . . differences found within the community and provides the means for their expression, interpretation and containment.[35]

Cohen's observations can serve as a reminder that we are dealing with consensuality less in terms of propositional content than in terms of the use of specific symbolic repertoires.[36] With these conceptual considerations in mind, we now turn to the exploration of consensuality as social practice in the Gwembe valley.

The Religious Field in the Gwembe Valley

Among the Gwembe Tonga, a Bantu-speaking people with a matrilineal and formerly acephalous form of social organisation, different kinds of spirits are associated with different social groupings and domains of activity. Whereas ancestors (*mizimu*) are related to the welfare of lineage and family members, the spirits of local rain shrines (*basangu*) and those manifesting themselves through prophets (*bami ba imvula*) are responsible for the maintenance of the agrarian cycle within the residential area and for the control of spatially extensive droughts, epidemics, and plagues by insects, respectively.[37] *Masabe* spirits are meanwhile a variety of spirits representing, for example, 'the wild', neighbouring tribes, aspects of European culture, and western technologies. When they are repeatedly incorporated during the sessions of a possession cult, their initially afflictive influence can be converted into beneficial effects on the lives of individuals.[38] As Terence Ranger has pointed out for sub-Saharan Africa in general, the association of the Gwembe Tonga with these different types of spirit is not mutually exclusive.[39] Gwembe Tonga choose which spirit to approach according to the specific problems they are faced with at that particular point in time.[40]

By and large, Christianity is approached in a similar way. Among the many socio-cultural changes that accompanied the construction of the Kariba dam in the mid 1950s, the evolution of what Ulrich Luig has called a 'free market of Christianity' is of particular relevance to the

35 A. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester, Ellis Horwood, 1985), p. 21.

36 My analytical focus on 'consensuality' should not be taken as implying any romantic notion of Africans as instinctively leaning towards norm compliance or of African societies as naturally being characterised by harmony, unanimity and communitarianism. Instead, invoking Bronislaw Malinowski's momentous insight that people's observance of social obligations and the rules of law are 'at best partial, conditional and subject to evasions' (B. Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* [London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1926], p. 15), I start from the assumption that 'consensus' is an idealist point of orientation that, similar to what has been suggested for 'egalitarianism', is not intrinsically or automatically given but socially constructed and the precarious result of sustained efforts to curb conflicts.

37 Concerning ancestral spirits, see E. Colson, 'Ancestral Spirits and Social Structure among the Plateau Tonga', *International Archives of Ethnography*, 47, 1 (1955), pp. 21 68; Colson, *The Social Organisation of the Gwembe Tonga*, pp. 122 61. Concerning rain shrines and prophets, see Colson, *The Social Organisation of the Gwembe Tonga*, pp. 61 6, 163 6; Scudder, *The Ecology of the Gwembe Tonga*, pp. 111 23. It is important to note that, due to their localised nature, the socio religious importance of the rain shrines decreased after resettlement in the mid 1950s (Colson, *The Social Consequences of Resettlement*, pp. 225 33; 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. 130 4; Colson, *Tonga Religious Life in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 68 71).

38 See E. Colson, 'Spirit Possession among the Tonga of Zambia', in J. Beattie and J. Middleton (eds), *Spirit Mediumship and Society* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 69 103; Colson, 'A Continuing Dialogue'; 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, 1994), pp. 33 49.

39 T. Ranger, 'The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History', in R.W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993), p. 74.

40 See also Colson, *Tonga Religious Life in the Twentieth Century*.

analysis being pursued here.[41] Western missions such as the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society, which had long retained a monopoly on Christianity in their spheres of influence in the Gwembe valley, now faced increasing competition from other western denominations, and especially African-initiated churches, leading to a socio-religious constellation of great complexity, heterogeneity and dynamism.

This situation stands in marked contrast to Colson's findings in the 1950s 1970s: 'as far as I have been able to discover, people remained indifferent to the appeal of the evangelists and missionaries'.[42] In line with what Paul Gifford has noted for present-day Zambia as a whole, most of the young and middle-aged generations in the area of my research were associated in the 1990s with a Christian congregation.[43] A considerable number of churches co-existed in mutual competition for members. In 1999, for instance, 18 different denominations could be found within an hour's walk of the small market town of Sinazeze. Since these churches also worked alongside different 'traditional' religious forms, my research area was, like the rest of the country, marked by a high degree of religious pluralism.

Christian practices in the Gwembe valley are characterised by a marked selectivity, in that changing one's church affiliation repeatedly (although sometimes only temporarily) represents the rule rather than the exception. To a large extent, people are free to attend the church of their choice, and even after making a selection, they are often sceptical of absolute claims to religious authority. Although young children generally attend the same church as their parents, at a certain age they often decide to change to another denomination.[44] And although women are mostly expected to join the church of their husbands after marriage, I observed many instances where husbands and wives belonged to different denominations.

This marked degree of affiliational mobility and selectivity is important for the argument I am making in this article. Particular families certainly have preferences for particular denominations. On the whole, however, the choice of church affiliation is a decidedly individual affair. Nobody can be forced to attend a certain denomination by either their relatives or the church authorities. Given this background, the various denominations have to struggle to maintain a following. Their authority is not fixed, but has to be continuously confirmed or even constituted anew. Being embedded in a highly competitive religious context, church leaders are thus at pains to demonstrate that their own denomination has been divinely ordained. If they fail to make their claims plausible, their congregations slowly drift away.

Intersections and Cross-Cutting Alliances

The floating fringe of membership in African-initiated churches is also due to temporary affiliations of people who belong to a different denomination. On the whole, this helps to diffuse religious discourses and practices. Not only are churchgoers continuously being confronted with other religious practices within their immediate social context, they also usually have first-hand experience of a variety of Christian churches themselves. What is more, besides going to church, most Christians are also associated with various non-Christian religious forms. For example, many of them have inherited an ancestral spirit, and many occasionally call on the services of 'traditional' herbalists or *masabe* healers. It is quite common for Christians to participate voluntarily (though clandestinely) in such religious practices, since it is usually impossible for them to refrain completely from them even if they wished to do so. This is because, as we will see below, where cases of affliction among relatives are concerned, people are expected to give their

41 Ulrich Luig, *Conversion as a Social Process* (Münster, Lit Verlag, 1997), p. 231.
42 Colson, 'Converts and Tradition', p. 146.
43 P. Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London, Hurst & Co, 1998), p. 183.
44 See also Colson, *Tonga Religious Life in the Twentieth Century*, p. 238.

support, regardless of whether the treatment chosen by the therapy management group contradicts the teachings of the religious community that the person concerned attends. Non-attendance at a healing session was sometimes even seen as an indication that the respective person was a witch and responsible for the affliction.

In order to acquire a clearer picture of the social complexities, mutual entanglements and cross-cutting alliances which make it difficult for people in the Gwembe valley to make uncompromising statements of religious distinction from others, the social configuration of one of the homesteads, where I was kindly hosted during my fieldwork, can serve as an apt ethnographic example.[45]

In September 1999, the church elders of the Spirit Apostolic Church (SAC), an African-initiated Pentecostal charismatic church with a membership of about 1,000 and headquarters in a village adjacent to the Lusaka Livingstone road, assembled at the homestead of Cephas, the pastor of Nanyenda. This homestead consisted of seven small grass-thatched houses surrounding a yard, at the centre of which were three cooking shelters. One of the houses belonged to Cephas and his wife and children. Another was inhabited by his nephew, who had recently married after returning from Livingstone, where he had been attending secondary school. While he had previously been a member of the Church of Christ, he now usually attended the United Church of Zambia, since it was the nearest to his home, and to him resembled his former denomination.

Two other houses were occupied by Cephas's elder brother, Miliot, and his two wives. Miliot had been one of the first members of the SAC in Nanyenda and had acted as a healer and evangelist up to 1996. The bishop in 1999, Rabson, had helped him to obtain a driving licence, so that he eventually succeeded in finding work as a taxi-driver in Lusaka, Zambia's capital city. Some months later, however, two clients threw him out of his car and drove away in it. After a rather demoralising return to his homestead, he felt that he was in a kind of limbo. He hesitated to join the SAC because he knew that, following his years away, he would have to subordinate himself to Cephas, his younger brother. More generally, he felt uncomfortably dependent on Cephas: he had not cultivated his own fields that year and therefore had to rely on the crops of his wives and of Cephas. His younger brother consequently had some control over him, despite the fact that it was actually Miliot who had inherited the spirit (*muzimu*) of a deceased uncle of their mother's lineage, which otherwise ought to give him authority over the family. Miliot had admittedly never enacted the rituals associated with ancestral spirits because he had never been required to do so by his relatives. All the same, his current situation, which seemed to undermine his authority, disquieted him. He felt that he was a guest in his younger brother's homestead, when it should ideally have been the other way round.

One of the other houses of the homestead belonged to Cephas's mother, Selina. She had refused to remarry when her husband died in 1995. During his lifetime Cephas's father had worked as a blacksmith. After her husband's death, Cephas's mother made a living by brewing and selling alcohol. About once or twice a week she would beat drums in order to attract customers, who would then sit around the homestead gradually getting drunk. Although Selina did not disapprove of her children's involvement in churches, she had never actually been a Christian herself. Instead she made sure that certain non-Christian religious practices were observed by the churchgoers among her descendants. When Cephas's wife, who was the chairperson of the SAC congregation in Nanyenda, gave birth to a son in 2001, Selina placed small pieces of paper and cloth at the entrance to the homestead so that pregnant

45 Fieldwork on Christianity in Zambia was conducted over a total of 17 months in 1993, 1995, 1999 and 2001, and was made possible by grants from the Free University of Berlin, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Research Foundation (DFG). Most of the villages and individuals I mention have been made anonymous. The designation 'Spirit Apostolic Church' is also a pseudonym.

women would not step into the yard. Otherwise, she claimed, there might be a miscarriage. In addition, Cephas occasionally approached his mother to interpret his dreams. One morning in 1999 he reported a vision of a particular type of tree. Selina interpreted this as indicating that he might become a 'traditional' herbalist (*mung'anga*), since this particular tree might eventually turn out to have healing powers. Cephas initially laughed at this suggestion, but then recalled that even his own father had been endowed with powers of curing. Finally he decided to wait until another dream revealed the kind of affliction that could be healed using the leaves of the tree he had seen in his vision.

Cephas's elder sister, who lived in the house next to her mother's, was a member of the New Apostolic Church. She had got divorced some years before and now helped her mother to brew beer. When Cephas was a young boy, he had accompanied her to church. Some years later, however, he became involved in the SAC, where he soon attained the position of pastor. Since then, he occasionally organised night-time gatherings of the SAC at his homestead, at which his sister used to join in the choir.

The very day on which the elders of the SAC gathered at the homestead in Nanyenda in September 1999, another of Cephas's older sisters walked into the yard. Since she had been sick for some months, her mother had recommended that she consult the healer of a *masabe* possession cult. While the church elders were waiting on one side of the yard for their Christian conference to start, preparations for a *masabe* divination were being made at the other end. After some time, the *masabe* healer called on the residents of the homestead to assist her in singing a particular song. If the patient's hands shook during the song, then the afflicting *masabe* spirit might be identified.

The singers eventually included most of the residents of the homestead, regardless of what Christian church they belonged to. Cephas, who, as the pastor of the SAC branch of Nanyenda, was hosting the elders' conference, found himself in a precarious situation. According to the main teachings of his Church, the *masabe* were demons. Yet he also realised that he was expected to show solidarity with respect to his sister's affliction. Ultimately, he chose a compromise position by endlessly walking around to urge others to join in the singing, while avoiding joining the group himself. Most church elders of the SAC watched the proceedings from the other side of the homestead with disgust. Being Cephas's guests, however, they refrained from explicitly voicing their disagreement and instead acted as if nothing unusual was happening. A number of them, indeed, watched the *masabe* divination with barely concealed curiosity. To the church leaders of Siamujulu village on the plateau, *masabe* possession cults were not as familiar as they were in the Gwembe valley.

This episode, and the specific social configuration involved, both highlight several important aspects that informed Christian practices in my area of research. First, besides going to church, most Christians were also associated with various non-Christian religious forms: Miliot had inherited an ancestral spirit (*muzimu*); Cephas would not deny completely that his dreams might be a sign of his becoming a 'traditional' herbalist (*mung'anga*); and Cephas's wife had joined in the singing of the *masabe* songs, although she was a regular member of the SAC. Secondly, it was usually impossible for churchgoers to refrain completely from participating in such religious practices. Especially where cases of affliction among relatives were concerned, they were expected to give their support. Thirdly, being aware of the fact that most branches of their church indeed, all of them apart from headquarters were unavoidably embedded in the contexts of such practices, the church leaders of Siamujulu village on the plateau did not explicitly argue against them in the presence of people from congregations in the Gwembe valley. They feared that outspoken opposition, let alone prohibition, would lead to a loss of members, or even secession. Certain views concerning the religious and socio-cultural flexibility of churchgoers consequently remained unspoken.

Questing for Consensuality

As we have seen, the socio-religious field in the area under study is characterised by a high degree of pluralism, competitiveness and ever-changing constellations of religious interaction. Yet, while this constellation is fraught with tensions, it very rarely involves open confrontation. Of course, there are cases of preachers who, during Sunday services, voice outright condemnation of non-Christian religious practices or of 'traditional' healers, who in their turn make deprecatory remarks about, for instance, western mission churches. All the same, in face-to-face encounters with members of other denominations or with practitioners of non-Christian religions, people generally try to keep a low profile in order to avoid arguments, quarrelling and open conflicts.

On the one hand, the wish to avoid conflicts results from people's fear that differences in opinion and open confrontation could lead to witchcraft being practised by one of the religious practitioners against others. As the following case of a church leader who was deemed to be a witch even by members of his own church illustrates, people go to great length to protect themselves, subtly but effectively, against magical attacks by witches.

In 1996, when tensions among church leaders of the SAC had intensified, many wanted the acting bishop, Chilembe Ng'andu, to step down from his post, but he did not show the slightest inclination to do so. Eventually a novel strategy was adopted. Since the other church leaders did not want to offend Ng'andu by removing him from office, they simply promoted him to be the church's archbishop. This office was a new invention: there had never been an archbishop in the SAC before, and the post was not even mentioned in the church's constitution. Ng'andu's promotion served two objectives at once. Despite the tensions, Ng'andu saved face, because the position of archbishop obviously bestowed honour upon him. Since it represented a 'promotion' within the church hierarchy, there was nothing Ng'andu could complain about; it was accordingly felt to be a safeguard against acts of (magical) revenge on his part. Yet no duties or rights were associated with this position, which, like its holder, had been assigned a status outside the conventions and constitution of the church.

For some years, Ng'andu accepted this arrangement, which had so deftly sidelined him. However, in spring 1999, sustaining this arrangement became problematic. First, rumour had it that Ng'andu had engaged in what was widely considered to be a case of immoral and non-Christian 'euthanasia': having been called to attend spiritually to a man who had for many years suffered the torments of a severe chronic illness, Ng'andu was suspected of having prayed not for this patient's recovery but for his timely death. Secondly, in April 1999 the new bishop of the SAC, Rabson, moved his residence to Siamujulu village for personal reasons, which brought him closer to where Ng'andu lived and subsequently made it more difficult for him to avoid encounters with the archbishop, who since his promotion had actually stopped attending church services and meetings.

On 23 May 1999, however, Rabson's presence induced Ng'andu to attempt to re-establish contact with the church by attending the Sunday service. For the first half-hour, the service proceeded as normal until Rabson's first wife, one of the main prophetesses in the congregation, suddenly started to speak in tongues, raising her arms as if in desperation and beating the front of her body. Some minutes later, she explained what had been revealed to her while she had been possessed by the Holy Spirit: there were demons in the church, and the congregation must have faith in order to fight them.

The church service continued with the collection and a discussion of an impending church meeting. Then the service ended; the deacon asked Ng'andu to say the final prayer, and a

hymn was sung by the whole congregation. While the congregation was dispersing, and while Ng'andu was peacefully chatting to the other church elders in front of the building, some prophet-healers treated the afflicted. About half an hour later, everybody had gone home.

The setting and course of this service was extraordinary in kind. The presence of Ng'andu, whom many suspected was a witch, influenced the proceedings to a crucial extent. I was later told by the church elders that the presence of demons intensifies, and often even triggers, the workings of the Holy Spirit, and there was no doubt that they thought that Ng'andu had been accompanied by evil spirits. Nevertheless, Ng'andu was not once directly and explicitly accused of being a witch neither in the church, nor in subsequent interactions. He was seated on the platform alongside the other church elders and was even asked to say the final prayer. Further, it was not in the least obvious from the calm conversation after the service that many feared Ng'andu: those who suspected him of being a witch behaved in a friendly and respectful manner towards him, like everybody else, later claiming that to have behaved differently might have been dangerous for them.

The specificities of this case notwithstanding, it aptly illustrates some common strategies in dealing with (potential) conflicts. First, the question of whether or how conflicts manifest themselves depends on the spatial proximity and distance between (potential) opponents. In the case of the SAC, tensions remained latent until Rabson moved his residence to the vicinity of Ng'andu's home. Before that, spatial distance and avoidance of contact had helped to prevent conflict. Secondly, people tend to behave respectfully, even or rather, especially towards those they fear and/or assume to be religiously or politically powerful. When seen in this light, Ng'andu's seemingly honourable 'promotion' to the office of archbishop, which was in fact a way of sidelining him, represented a modern solution to an old problem. Thirdly, if it proves impossible in practice to avoid contact, interactions between (potential) opponents are usually conducted in a formal and polite tone.

On the other hand, the wish to avoid conflicts is often due to people's striving for religious efficacy. For example, when attending a new Christian denomination during a quest for therapy, people normally adjust themselves to whatever religious practice is being pursued there. Since the Pentecostal charismatic churches are ultimately judged according to their effectiveness when dealing with afflictions, such judgements represent post hoc assessments.[46] Unanimity within a religious community is considered a prerequisite in successfully making contact with God. Put the other way round, it is widely assumed among religious practitioners in the Gwembe valley that conflicts between the participants within a religious ritual have adverse consequences on its effectiveness. Among members of African-initiated churches, this idea is expressed in the formula that consensuality is willed by God. The temporary visitors in an African-initiated church thus make its discourses and practices their own, so as to learn later whether they work effectively or not.

Although such adjustments frequently entail suggestions of exclusivity in the sense that 'our Church is the only divinely ordained community' the intersection of different Christian and non-Christian practices during the lifetime of any one person builds up a certain variable stock of religious knowledge. Churchgoers clearly advocate a particular Christian practice and reject others at one point in time, while confidently adopting just the opposite position on other occasions. A similar observation is made by Benetta Jules-Rosette in her book on the African Apostles of Johane Maranke: 'I learned to expect that

46 See also T.G. Kirsch, 'Restaging the Will to Believe: Religious Pluralism, Anti Syncretism, and the Problem of Belief', *American Anthropologist*, 106, 4 (2004), pp. 699 711.

the rhetorical strength of a single interpretation was more important than consistency operating across explanations'.[47] When seen in a wider perspective, therefore, the religious discourses and practices of different denominations and non-Christian religious forms in my area of research do not represent mutually exclusive stocks of knowledge but rather parallel worlds, which are intersected by people's affiliation practices and the common practice of 'trying out'. Since each of these experienced 'worlds' can be deemed plausible, they can be invoked at specific times and for specific purposes according to the situation and matter at issue.

Taken together, both motivations for avoiding conflict in socio-religious interactions outlined above namely people's fear of becoming victims of witchcraft and their desire for religious efficacy contribute to an atmosphere where there is much stress on peaceability and the quest to find a minimum of consensus. In everyday interactions between members of different Christian denominations, this quest for consensuality usually means that differences in religious discourse and practice are downplayed. For example, while the fact that the Seventh-Day Adventists (SDA) hold church services not on Sundays but on Saturdays was criticised by several interlocutors of other denominations, I also witnessed many occasions where, in personal conversation with SDA members, the same individuals declared this difference to be irrelevant.

The same applies to interactions between professed Christians and people who did not identify with Christianity. For example, as I came to learn over time, there was no unanimity among the senior church elders of the SAC any more than among many other Tonga I talked to concerning whether or not the 'traditional' religious practices of their ancestors represented something qualitatively different from Christianity. For some, Christianity was a novel religion that had been introduced by the Europeans to their previously altogether 'ignorant' and 'pagan' ancestors. Many others emphasised that the Tonga had practised some form of Christianity even before the arrival of the Europeans, stating that their ancestors had also prayed to God (*leza*) although only via the spirits of the deceased. They also maintained that the local rain shrines (*malende*) had been the 'churches' of the ancestors. Elderly Christians thus recalled that the European mission churches had initially been called *malende amukuwa* ('the shrines of the whites'). It was particularly the latter group which stressed commonalities rather than differences in interactions with practitioners of non-Christian religions.

Discordance as Unintended Consequence

Against the backdrop of the empirical cases outlined above, the final step in my analysis draws inspiration from the Manchester school's methodological emphasis on processuality and the dynamics of temporarily consecutive social situations. This is expressed in the notion of the ethnographic 'extended case study', the idea of which is

> to take the actors and their roles in any particular incident and trace these self same actors through other incidents, in this way linking the varied incidents to one another and identifying the actual

47 B. Jules Rosette, *African Apostles* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 207. At first sight, this flexibility seems to be indicative of mild mannered liberalism and socio religious pragmatism, or even of a certain laissez faire attitude. However, the disadvantage of this practice is that actors in this religious field constantly face 'spiritual insecurity' that results from 'the proliferation of interpretive authorities claiming to speak the truth about the action of invisible forces … and the inability of any particular form of authority to achieve dominance in making sense of a place where a superfluity of dangers, doubts, and fear engenders a pressing need for meaning' (A. Ashforth, 'Reflections on Spiritual Insecurity in a Modern African City [Soweto]', *African Studies Review*, 41, 3 [1998], p. 65).

> mechanisms (as logically distinct from the normative principles) operating in the relevant social order'.[48]

Adopting this sequence-oriented approach allows the ethnographer to discern macro-social regularities across time, which are embedded in and yet also go beyond the situated particularities of micro-sociality.

This way of bringing together 'the general with the particular'[49] generates an interesting insight when applied to the tendency among religious practitioners in the Gwembe valley to seek consensuality. In turn, consensuality presupposes finding compromises that bridge the differences of opinion with which people from different socio-religious backgrounds enter into interaction. Religious practitioners thus engage in the symbolic construction of community via the quest for consensuality. This does not happen just once. Due to their great affiliational mobility, religious practitioners try to achieve consensuality not just in one interactional setting but successively in different constellations of religious interaction involving different social actors from different backgrounds. Accordingly, the compromises required for achieving at least a minimum consensus vary considerably. What is a viable compromise in one interactional setting might not be an option in another.

For example, when conducting fieldwork in Siamujulu village in 1995, I periodically accompanied a member of the SAC during the daily routines of his life, which included cutting wood, transforming it into charcoal and selling it on the Lusaka Livingstone road. Since he was widely known to be a churchman, his dealings and chats with neighbours often revolved around religious matters. Yet comparing the statements uttered and agreed to by those participating in these conversations, one finds great differences in the truth claims made on different occasions. While it was agreed on one occasion that Jesus is God and that God's message is universal for all mankind, the consensus during another conversation with a different constellation of interlocutors was that Jesus is an ancestral spirit of the Europeans, which would as a consequence make him less important for Africans than the Holy Spirit. On yet another occasion, Jesus was called a 'prophet' who was succeeded in his divine mission by subsequent generations of prophets, including Zambians such Chilembe Ng'andu of the SAC.[50]

Thus, generally speaking, this pluralisation of the quest for consensuality results in a plurality of what in particular is agreed upon as consensus, with subsequent consensuses often substantially contradicting those achieved on previous occasions. In this way, seemingly paradoxically, individuals' quests for micro-social consensuses contribute to their macro-social discordance.

Conclusion

'There's a familiar fairy tale in the social sciences that goes more or less as follows', writes Judith Irvine:

> Once upon a time, in a country far away, social life was based on consensus. The people who lived in Consensusland occasionally faced problems and disagreements, but these were abnormal occurrences, and many of them arose out of misunderstandings or natural disasters like

48 Evens and Handelman (eds), *The Manchester School*, p. 2; see also M. Burawoy, 'The Extended Case Method', *Sociological Theory*, 16, 1 (1998), pp. 4 33; C. Mitchell, 'Case and Situation Analysis', *Sociological Review*, 31, 2 (1983), pp. 187 211; van Velsen, *The Extended Case Method and Situational Analysis*.

49 T.M.S. Evens, 'Some Ontological Implications of Situational Analysis', in Evens and Handelman (eds), *The Manchester School*, p. 50.

50 T.G. Kirsch, 'Visions and Evidences: Prophetic Scripture and a "Crisis of Representation" in Zambia', *Visual Anthropology*, 19, 2 (2006), pp. 105 22.

> earthquakes and drought. So the people of Consensusland solved their problems and adapted to their environment and lived happily ever after.[51]

Tongaland is no Consensusland as portrayed in this fairy tale. In the Gwembe valley one regularly finds arguments, conflicts, controversies, disagreements, disputes, quarrels, strife and interpersonal violence. Yet, as Irvine also points out, 'rather than simply inverting a consensus theory of social life and recasting Consensusland as Discordia',[52] anthropologists should aim at examining how conflict and consensus are intertwined.

In this article, I have used Nader's notion of harmony ideology and Cohen's observation that consensuality does not necessarily concern propositional contents, in order to explore the dynamics within a socio-religious field in Zambia that is characterised by pluralism and competitiveness, as well as, most importantly, individuals' desires to avoid manifest conflicts. In addressing the quest for consensuality among present-day African Christians, which is partly due to their striving for religious efficacy, the analytical focus of this article contrasts with what for a long time has been a characteristic feature of anthropological studies of African Christianity, namely the 'paradigm of dissensuality'.

Moreover, while making practical use of Manchester school methodologies and concepts, in terms of the notion of 'cross-cutting alliances' and the interest in pursuing a 'macro anthropology grounded in practice',[53] I am nevertheless departing from their writings in one major aspect. In contrast to Gluckman's famous remark, quoted above, I have argued that the stress on consensuality on the micro-social level produces discordance on the macro level of sociality. As a consequence, assuming that Consensuslands are the provinces of Discordia, we can begin to understand a specificity of the religious field in present-day Zambia which rarely involves open conflict and yet at the same time is characterised by self-determination, competitiveness and pluralism. The endeavour to talk with one (peaceful) voice has the unintended consequence of culminating in polyphonic discordance.

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51 J. Irvine, 'Afterword: Disputing Consensus', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 20, 1 (2004), p. 214.
52 Irvine, *Afterword*, p. 214.
53 Evens and Handelman (eds), *The Manchester School*, p. 6.