The Shade of Religion:

Kyangyang and the Works of Prophetic Imagination in Guinea-Bissau

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Prayer and religious 'crossover' in West Africa

Some will say that the fallacious beauty
created by the shadows is not the authentic beauty.
Tankizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*

We were the shadows,
the reverse of the luminous beings.
Jean Genet, *Les Nègres*

West Africa is becoming the paradigmatic place in which to explore the encounters between Christianity and Islam (and vernacular religions too). Many West African villages are multi-religious, as well as multi-ethnolinguistic. In Guinea-Bissau, a country in which we have been conducting fieldwork since 1990 (Marina Temudo) and 2008 (Ramon Sarró), we often visit a village with eight distinct ethno-linguistic groups and three world religions, plus many local shrines and some prophetic syntheses too. However, because anthropologists tend to specialize in one world religion or another (let alone in one ethnic group or another), the cultural, practical and cognitive logics of coexistence and pluralism tend to be under-theorized. This shortcoming has been encouraged by the emergence of subfields such as the anthropology of Islam and the anthropology of Christianity.

There was some promising seminal work done in the past that should have encouraged the study of religious pluralism and its workings (e.g. Ottenberg 1984); but over the last decades, specialization seems to have worked against the study of coexistence and the search for 'one single analytical frame', to take up Ottenberg's invitation. With some exceptions, such as the collective volume edited by Soares (2006), Larkin and Meyer (2006), and the posthumously published work of Peel (2016), anthropologists in West Africa have tended to study religious traditions in isolation from each other. More ethnography on religious encounters and their compromises is needed so that we can advance towards a more sustained theoretical work on religious conviviality. Thus, we welcome Peel's invitation to investigate what he called (in a personal communication in 2005) the 'crossover' of Islam and Christianity in West Africa, an invitation already taken up by some authors (e.g. Janson and Meyer 2016).

One of the privileged *loci* where the two world religions meet is in the set of verbal and bodily practices we call 'prayer'. West Africa might well be a paradigmatic place in which to study the 'social glue' aspect of this practice. In Christian and Muslim West Africa, the concept of 'prayer' is used as a metonymy for religion. It is usual to hear expressions to the effect of 'I am going to the prayer' as synonyms for 'I am going to the mosque' or 'I am going to the Christian meeting or the church'. Moreover, the expression 'the people of the prayer' (*ahalu salat* in Maninka) is used to refer to the sameness that underlies both Christians and Muslims. Again, scholars have tended to neglect the centrality of prayer, and even some important monographs on the region that include 'prayer' in their titles (Linares 1992; Masquelier 2001; Soares 2005) do not address the issue of prayer in their analyses, and instead use 'prayer' (much as their African interlocutors do) as a shorthand for 'religion'.

We would like to suggest that the centrality of prayer in West African religion, which is explicit in people's views, ought to be respected for two reasons. Firstly, the centrality of idioms around 'prayer' highlights the community-making aspect of the religious practice. At the discursive level, praying constitutes a common index by which people perceive themselves as equals ('the people of the prayer'), even if they belong to different world religions. At the practical level, occasions for prayer (especially the big Muslim and Christian calendar feasts) bring people together, and it is not unusual for a Muslim to pray with Christians at Easter or for Christians to pray with Muslims at the Aid-al-Ud festival (known as *tabaski* across West Africa), and for both to pray together at funerals and other family occasions. Secondly, the pervasiveness of the locution 'the people of the prayer' implies the exclusion of, and makes tantalizing reference to, those who do *not* pray and who are looked down upon as backward. Despite its undeniable centripetal force, prayer also produces its own centrifugal margins, and in this article we look at a people who have been marginalized and stigmatized for not belonging to the category of 'the people of the prayer', and at their imaginative response to their exclusion. These people are the Balanta farmers-and-herders of Guinea-Bissau, who until recently resisted conversion to world religions. Indeed, the Balanta are so stereotypically known as resistant to religious, economic, and political forms of domination that a popular etymology of the word *balanta* makes it stem from a Mandingo verb meaning 'to resist'. Today there are many Balanta villages in which social life is structured according to the demands of local spirits and ancestors (sacrifices, spiritual contracts), but in which monotheistic creeds, i.e. Islam and Christianity, are increasingly present and are overcoming the tenacity with which previous generations of Balanta opposed them.

Whether animist, Muslim or Christian, and whether Balanta or any other group, inhabitants of Guinea-Bissau share an understanding that the territory is inhabited by spirits who are perceived to be the true owners of the place and its natural resources (e.g., Temudo 2012). Access to land and resources is controlled by the head of the founding descent group (which was putatively the first to arrive), who is supposed to have made a contract with the territory's spirit. The head then acted as a broker in granting permission for other people to settle in the territory. The social contract among humans is thus built on a spiritual contract between humans and spirits. Notions of contract are often invoked in explicit opposition to notions of prayer. You are either people of the prayer *or* people who make contract with local earth spirits. Religions of the prayer – Islam and Christianity – very much loathe contractual relationships with the divinity. The idea that you can alter your destiny by making a contract with a spirit is contrary to the notion that humans cannot alter God's designs, and among many believers of both Islam and Christianity, it gives rise to notions of making a contract with the Devil. The philosophies of fate and destiny underlying religions of contract and religions of prayer are very different, although – as Sarró and de Barros (2015) have noted – Guinea-Bissau is notorious for finding compromises between strict oppositions.

In recent history, one such compromise has been provided by the Kyangyang prophetic movement among the Balanta. The term Kyangyang can be translated as both 'shadow' and 'shade', and the movement started in 1984 and enjoyed very visible florescence in the 1980s. As Caellwert (2000) documented in her very detailed ethnographic and theological description of the early Kyangyang, thousands of Balanta joined the movement. In those years, Balanta farmers would be seized by an ancestor who, speaking in the name of the high God Nhala, taught them how to pray to God,

very much in the style of Muslims and Christians.[1] In its origins, the Kyangyang prophetic movement was largely a mimetic cult in which possessed individuals adopted visible and stereotypical praying practices so that they too could be considered 'people of the prayer'. By taking on bodily attitudes such as kneeling, engaging in imitation of writing practices, dressing as Muslims and Christians did, praying in glossolalia in ways that resembled Muslim or Christian prayer and so on, Kyangyang can be regarded as a practice aimed at bridging the gap between contract and prayer. As such, it provides an ideal ethnographic setting for studying the transformative power of prayer, both at the individual and the social and historical levels.

The early days of Kyangyang are often remembered in epidemiological terms. We have been told by people old enough to remember its explosion in the 1980s that you had to be very careful then, because if you were close to a Kyangyang members Kyangyang could easily catch you too ('Kyangyang was very dangerous' one interviewee told us). It should be said that in those early years, Kyangyang members would live together in prophetic enclaves, far away from mainstream Balanta society. However, this seclusion, and the epidemiological dimension of the movement, started to decrease after an alleged *coup d'état* was blamed on Balanta agitators. State persecution of Kyangyang leaders ensued (see below), and several of them ended up in prison. These events led to the dismantling of Kyangyang communities and forced the movement's adherents back into Balanta villages.

After that, Kyangyang individuals learned to live alongside their Muslim, Christian and animistic neighbours, and vice versa, each practising their own religion.

[1] Although animist Balanta knew of the existence of the high God Nhala prior to the emergence of the prophetic movement in the 1980s, Nhala was a very distant divinity to which very little, if any, worship was dedicated, as is expected of the 'two-tier basic cosmology' common to West African in general (Horton 1971).

Between 1990 and 2017 the number of new members (we should avoid the concept of 'converts' as Kyangyang adepts do not see themselves as converts) emerging has declined. In fact, all the Kyangyang we interviewed in several parts of the country up to mid-March 2017 were middle-aged women and men who had joined the movement in their youth in the 1980s; only a few had joined in the early 2000s. The sense of 'danger' associated with being close to a Kyangyang individual and 'catching' Kangyang has also simmered down. In many Balanta villages today, you find one or several Kyangyang people working as healers and tending to the various ailments of non-Kyangyang members of the community without 'converting' anybody or raising any fear of contagion.

The voice of the prophetess

In 1984 rumours spread that a woman called Ntombikte was possessed by Nhala and had announced important changes in Balanta social life. This turned out to be inaccurate. In our interviews, Ntombikte claimed to have been possessed by an ancestor who spoke in the name of Nhala, not directly by Nhala.

Prophets exist everywhere – although the African continent seems to be particularly prone to boast of them (Sarro 2018) – but they are only heard when there is a 'time of singularity', as Ardener (1989) put it. Ardener reversed the usual, intuitive relationship between prophets and prediction. Prophets, in his view, are not particularly good at predicting what is to happen (a rice farmer may be better than a prophet in predicting the amount of rice she will get at the end of the season), but they are very imaginative in telling people what to do when the conditions of prediction disappear (for example, when the singularity of the times makes it impossible for a farmer to

predict the amount of rice he/she will get). Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Balanta were undergoing a major 'crisis' (for a description, see Temudo 2009), which provided the conditions of plausibility for a new voice of prophecy to be heard and given meaning to. But social conditions by themselves certainly cannot explain everything. We must also consider Ntombikte's own life-story as she told it to us during several visits we paid her before she died in 2013, and as she had told it to other scholars (de Jong 1987; Callawaert 2000).

The Kyangyang movement was particularly attractive to young men and women, who saw in it a way to channel rebellious feelings and to escape from the hardships of Balanta custom and the exclusion they were experiencingat both the hands of the state and the elders in the own villages (see, for example, Lopes 1990: 34–5; Temudo 2009: 55; Temudo and Abrantes 2015).[2] In the early days some Kyangyang youths were iconoclastic, engaging in violent destruction of shrines, even though Ntombikte reassured us that she was always against such violence and that these acts were performed by 'opportunistic people'. Since much of the young labour force abandoned their villages and moved together to live in parallel prophetic enclaves, the Kyangyang movement became very disruptive for Balanta society. On occasion, people today recall, elders had to pretend they were Kyangyang in order to regain the youths' willingness to work for them. In other words, the elders had to become the shadows' shadows, copying the behaviour and ways of life of the youngsters who were trying to escape their control in order to regain their labour.

[2] Namely, Balanta young men were interdicted to marry and create their own household before manhood initiation, which occurred after their forties; even upon marrying they could not engage in non-agricultural activities, and accumulation had to be oriented towards the increase of the descent group's herd. Young women were forced to marry very old men. Both the state and individuals from other ethnic groups looked down upon Balanta as being 'backward' owing to their lack of formal education, their refusal of either Islam or Christianity, and because of some of their customs (such as theft of cows, to which young Balanta men are encouraged as part of their coming-of-age).

Ntombikte's followers wore a white gown, a garment that they associated with Islam, Catholicism, and hospital staff, and rejected red, a colour that stood for the very things they wanted to move away from: animal sacrifice and contracts with spirits. They always carried a knife with which to unearth medicines; this was also a reversal of its perceived traditional use[3]. The Kyangyang's carrying of a knife was an explicit commentary, interviewees told us, on the nature of such objects: they had to be tools for digging medicine, not weapons to kill or fight. Adepts also had a 'book' in which they wrote the messages of Nhala, using an individual script that was in the form of what some linguists have called either 'pseudo-writing' (Smaley *et al.* 1990) or 'spirit writing' (Keane 2013). Most of the earliest adepts were illiterate, and they considered that it was Nhala who taught them how to write. The characters they used were sometimes similar to Arabic, sometimes similar to the Roman alphabet. More often than not, however, they were lines with little resemblance to any specific writing, but that worked as mnemonic devices to induce people into a trance and into praying in glossolalia.

By 1985, the movement had become so big that the Bissauan government – concerned about the potential for a Balanta uprising – began to fear it. That year, the government sent a commission, led by Manuel Saturnino, an important Guinean politician and war veteran, and including several doctors and politicians, to the villages to find out about Kyangyang. Given that many Balanta commanders had been removed from positions of power, especially since President Bernardo 'Nino' Viera took power in 1980, fears of an uprising were justified. The way the scrutinizing mission went about its work, as reported to us by one witness, is worth recounting:

[3] Iron is a very ambivalent object in West Africa, as with it you can both make tools to improve society and weapons to destroy life.

> Several people came to Catió [in Southern Guinea-Bissau]. Guinean medical doctors came together with white [Western] doctors. They asked Kyangyangs to bring all their medicines inside bottles and put them over the table. Kyangyangs were [standing] all together, and some of them could not keep still, they kept dancing and nodding their heads and saying 'aang aang aang aang' as though they were high on drugs. Since nobody knew what it was that made them behave like this, they called Ntombikte to interview her. They asked her what was in each flask, what kind of plant it was and what illness it cured. Ntombikte explained what kind of plants she had in each flask and how she prepared them […]. They asked, 'what kind of illnesses do you treat with this?' […] She explained what each thing treated, and the doctors said, 'Ok, there are here some medicines that are good medicines. But when white people make medicines, they must classify them, and they have to look at them through the microscope in order to know the exact quantity they have to use for each illness. We are going to take these medicines to study them in our laboratory. If by any chance these are drugs that make you shake your head, then we will know. If they are good medicines, you can consider yourselves lucky.'

The encounter between the state's agents and the Kyangyang, according to our witness, ended in quite a violent way. Suddenly, a Kyangyang woman took her knife and in a defiant way, nodding her head, approached the doctors and politicians to express her deep dissatisfaction (we quote her words as told by our witness):

> Balanta have received all abuses; it is Balanta who plough, it is Balanta who work very hard, but it is Balanta who eat *kakre*. Now Balanta too changed their religion. They are not going to eat *kakre* any longer; they are going to eat specialized food, like Muslims do.

Kakre, the food often referred to in descriptions of food habits among the Balanta, is a kind of crab. It is eaten by many peoples, but the way in which Balanta ate it was perceived as particularly rudimentary. In fact, Balanta food in general was perceived as dirty and ill-prepared by their neighbours (those who eat 'specialized food', as the woman said), and the Balanta seem to have internalized this view.

At the meeting, Manuel Saturnino told the woman to shut up, and asked the Balanta to stop nodding their heads. Some did, but most of them continued, as though the nodding was something beyond their will. Saturnino then ordered the policemen to beat them, which they did. The people stopped nodding, and Saturnino pronounced his victory: 'You see; this [head nodding] is pure fake; it is not a thing that God commanded you to do; it is a thing that you put in your heads you wanted to do.' Those who were beaten and the alleged leaders were taken to prison. Ntombikte followed thier fate, and a few months later she was again imprisoned along with some of the other main leaders of the movement.

In her interviews with us, Ntombikte expressed the conviction that the Balanta were viewed very negatively by the surrounding people, but that this was their own fault. Ntombikte in fact operated a transition from 'blame' to 'guilt' common to other prophetic movements (Behrend 1999; Walker 1980). She clearly thought that the Balanta were the agents of their own misfortune. She wanted her people to stop

accusing each other of having made contracts with the spirits whenever someone became richer or more successful than someone else. She had herself been accused of having made a contract with spirits, initially because she was unable to have children, and later because she lived on her own and had been able to cultivate a large cashew orchard. She had in fact left her husband because both he and her co-wives did not want her to follow the commandments she received from Nhala.

For someone who thirty years earlier was on the verge of madness (or so people thought), in our conversations Ntombikte proved to be a clairvoyant diagnostician of her people's crisis and predicaments. Her diagnosis was that famine was people's own fault; she suggested they should educate their taste for other foods and learn to cultivate other plants. She also expressed that they would feel less hungry if women also worked towards the collective wellbeing of the household, as Muslim women do in the area. They would also be less hungry if they limited the killing of cows at funerals to just one cow, instead of showing off how big a *lante ndan* (elder) was by killing as many cows as the descent group can afford. Finally, they would be less hungry if they prayed to Nhala instead of engaging in contracts with spirits in shrines. Nhala, she claimed, was angry at them for their attachment to shrines. She also announced that people should stop valuing theft (in Balanta society young men were encouraged to steal other people's cows, which gave rise to a lot of intra and inter-ethnic violence).

Illness and death, she said, were people's fault too. When people became ill, they normally visited a series of diviner-healers, one after the other, and 'they rarely go to hospitals or to Kyangyang healers', as she put it to us. Ntombikte insisted (to her public and to us) on the importance for the Balanta of sending their children to school, teaching them how to pray, and keeping their bodies and houses clean. In contrast to the

importance given in the early days of the movement to giving up extra-marital sexual relations – a very common practice among the Balanta (Temudo 2019) – in her interviews with us in the early 2000s, Ntombikte minimized the importance of it. Yet she placed great importance on altering gender relations in work, and insisted on reaching a new gender division of agricultural labour; one that would encourage diversification of crops, cropping systems and diet. In the 1980s, she had also been very antagonistic towards alcohol drinking as well as to the use of red clothes, but again her opposition to this was relaxed over the years. While most Kyangyang we have met have a strong preference for white robes, and while a white flag is still today the main indicator that there are Kyangyang inhabitants in a compound or village, in 2008 we noticed that red clothes were coming to the fore again. In one of our meetings that year, even Ntombikte herself was wearing a red robe. In our last spell of fieldwork among Kyangyang (in April 2016), we noticed that more and more Kyangyang leaders were using red robes and red paraphernalia.

Ntombikte was aware that some of Nhala's commands were changing a bit in relation to her earlier pronouncements. As she put it, this is Nhala's talk and this talk comes little by little. As a logical consequence, she never boasted of having a whole body of divine commandments, but claimed instead a fluid relationship with Nhala, who told her what to do, what to say, what to accept and what to expect of her fellow Balanta farmers. In any case, while some things changed, she was always adamant that the main message she received from Nhala was always one of development: 'Nhala tells us to "move forward"', she said in no uncertain terms, adding, 'this is why we are hungry; because we do not want to respect Nhala. We say nay, Nhala does not exist.' Indeed, she succeeded as an independent and successful female farmer, and we must say that all

the Kyangyang adepts we have met are hardworking and exemplary farmers. While illiterate themselves, many of the early sKyangyang individuals were also among the first Balanta to want to send their children to school.

The developments of the last twenty-five years show us that in fact Kyangyang individuals are finding a place in their society in which to meaningfully live. They no longer live in a separate, anti-structural and *communitas*-based prophetic enclave as they did in the 1980s, but are intermingled in mainstream villages with other Balanta farmers-and-herders, mostly with animistic ones, and they and their ritual practices are accepted by their neighbours. There is a political history behind this transformation (for details, see de Jong 1987; Cardoso 1990; Drift 1990; Lopes 1990). When Ntombikte and the other main leaders came out of prison in 1985, they found themselves in a political ambience that was very oppressive for the Balanta. Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira, then President of Guinea-Bissau, fearing a *coup-d'état* led by Balanta soldiers had imprisoned around 150 Balanta politicians and army men, many of whom were killed; among them were the anti-colonial war veterans Paulo Correia and Viriato Pam. Ntombikte – as well as many other Balanta interviewees − felt that the murder of Paulo Correia had been a consequence of his support for Kyangyang. It is plausible that President 'Nino' considered that such huge groups of brave and enthusiastic rural youths could be instrumentalized by Correia should he attempt a *coup d'état*. After her imprisonment, Ntombikte was instructed by Vieira's government to dismantle the prophetic enclaves, and Kyangyang members went into a semi-clandestine state and kept a low profile. They reintegrated into their own mainstream Balanta villages (sometimes after participating in rituals asking forgiveness for having previously destroyed shrines), where they started working as healers and diviners. Interestingly, the

places where a Kyangyang healer works are today called *fram*, the very word that is used for the shrines that they so keenly and often aggressively destroyed in the early days of the movement. This making of a new religious landscape was accompanied by the creation in their compounds of so-called hospitals, the name they give to the houses they build for their patients, and churches, the houses where Kyangyang perform their rituals and prayers, either individually or in groups.

There are several interpretations as to why followers of Ntombikte, and followers of followers of Ntombikte, were called 'shadows'. The least that can be said is that it is a very ambiguous conceptualization. On occasions, the term 'shadow' seems to be used in a derogatory way to deny people's agency, to portray them as zombies. At first, Kyangyang adepts lived in the bush, all dressing in white, holding a knife in their hand, walking in a row, wobbling, nodding their heads and making howling sounds. 'They looked like people high on drugs (…); meeting them in the bush was really fearsome', as one interviewee who had witnessed the early developments of the movement put it. But 'shadow' is a powerful, multi-layered metaphor. As such, it has multiple readings, and some interviewees elaborated other, more positive possibilities. Some did not insist on the lack of agency of a shadow, or on the zombification of the Kyangyang individuals, but quite the opposite, reflected on the plasticity of a shadow and its uncanny ability to enter a room and make itself disappear or to escape being caught by someone. Others expressed the even more positive fact that a shadow, unlike a body, is never hot but always fresh (in Balanta language, being fresh, *txole*, means being healthy). Shadows have in fact been a topic of great concern in the Africanist tradition, from the insightful pages on ancestors as shades among the Tsonga in Elisabeth Colson's work in Rhodesia (Colson 1960), or the shadow as the inner self

among the Buiisi of Congo (Jacobson-Widding 1990; Douglas 1995), to the more contemporary shadows of globalization and of urban exclusion (Ferguson 2006; de Boeck and Balori 2016). Outside Africanist anthropology, from philosophers like Plato to modern psychoanalysts like Jung, and from literary authors like the French writer Jean Genet and Japanese writer Jun'Ichiro Tankizaki to South African artists like William Kentridge, shadows and shades have proved fertile ground for the imagination and cool places wherein to be critical of the 'luminous beings', to use Jean Genet's provocative imagery (1958). Although in Balanta language the word *kyangyang* means 'shadow' – but not 'ghost' or 'spirit', as would be the case in other African languages – it may be helpful for comparative purposes to note that the term 'shades' is used in some African cultures to refer to the spirits of ancestors that are inherited by an individual (Colson 1960). Indeed, Kyangyang appears to be, very explicitly and consensually among interviewees, a spiritual movement in which the individual attains a strong, intimate connection with his or her ancestors (mostly patrilineal, though avuncular spirits may sometimes seize individuals) and, through them, with the high God Nhala.

Between contract and prayer: religious syntheses and convergences

The shadowy, mimetic aspect of Kyangyang is often used by Muslim and Christian observers as a reason to consider it a 'fake religion' (*relijon di trosa*, in Kriol). Muslim people in Guinea-Bissau say they do not consider Kyangyang a proper religion of the prayer, because Kyangyang members, they say, are imitating Muslim behaviour and are not *true* believers. They *pretend* to be praying, but do not have the required *sincerity*. Mimesis is a very common element of many prophetic movements and has been the

object of many studies. In one first important paper on anti-witchcraft movements in central Africa, A. I. Richards (1935) keenly noted the mimetic appropriation of 'modernity' these movements, and especially their leaders, were attempting. The topic of mimesis in religion has since been dealt with by a legion of Africanist anthropologists (e.g., Kramer 1993; Stoller 1995; Behrend 1999). The transformative force of mimesis, however, has often been minimized. Authors have tended to stress the expressive side of the practice of copying, the desire to become something else in mimetic practices, or the willingness to mock the oppressive powers of those you are mimicking. We should not forget that mimesis happens in time, and as such is part of a transformational process, one in which *becoming* actually occurs. Mimesis is part of a long struggle to claim a space in which life can be meaningful and voices heard. It is also part of a struggle for recognition. We believe that Kyangyang, when placed in the *longue durée*, can be seen as part of a slow but steady transformation of the post-colonial Balanta. It has offered many imaginative ideas, many unheard-of models by which the Balanta can organize themselves in alternative ways to the gerontocratic, rigid structures of the past.

Almost all the Kyangyang members in the 1980s were illiterate and knew very little about the schools they sketched in the inspired drawings they collected in their notebooks. They knew just as little about the boats, airplanes, telephones and other technologies they also tried to capture in their notebooks as part of their desire to become and to be connected to a wider, modern world. But Balanta children started to go to school, and today are introducing new attitudes towards schooling in the Balanta villages that were once vehemently set against Western education (Temudo and Abrantes 2015). Just as in the Zionist churches studied by Jean Comaroff (1985), in

Kyangyang prophetic enclaves the expressive meets the instrumental. Mimesis is not 'magic of despair', to use the derogatory concept by which Gluckman (1963) characterized the anti-colonial Mau-Mau movement; it is rather a tool in the struggle for hope and for political participation, as James Ferguson (2002, 2006) argued in relation to the Hauka cult filmed by Jean Rouch in colonial Gold Coast in 1955. Ferguson, knowingly or not, brought together the two main concepts through which Plato connected material reality to the ideal world: *mimesis* (imitation) and *methexis* (participation). The Balanta are not, or not only, mocking the Muslims or Christians they imitate. They are *learning* to use the languages of power and community used by the others, so that they can share and participate in the public sphere on an equal footing[4]. Through Kyangyang, the Balanta express their will to be connected to a wider world, while also being connected to the ancestors and to their God.

Another aspect that may strike the observer of Kyangyang is its 'syncretistic' nature: its objective, explicit mixture of religious elements. If you go to the household of a Kyangyang, chances are you will find a book here, a cross there, some white colour here, some red colour there, a rosary here, a crescent there, a Kyangyang written charm on the wall, and perhaps a traditional shrine a bit further away. As a legion of scholars have argued, however (cf. the studies in the volume edited by Stewart and Shaw 1994), 'syncretism' is too descriptive a concept if not accompanied by an analysis of the active process of synthesis achieved by its religious agents. Ever since divergent etymologies were offered first by Cicero and later by Christians like St. Augustine, scholars seem to have been debating whether the Western concept of *religion* stems from *religare* ('to bind together') or from *relegere,* understood as the action of going over again, of re-

[4] For a similar point about a South African prophetic movement, see Gunner (2002).

reading, carefully observing rules, remembering actions, giving new meanings to old symbols and achieving syntheses by recollecting the past (Benveniste 1969; Berliner and Sarro 2007). More than elucidating the quest for the origin of the word 'religion' and of the institution, the double etymology of our concept is useful because it opens two ideal-typical aspects of all religions. Certainly, the search for togetherness is a very explicit and active goal in Kyangyang rituals and in its leaders' ideology, but parallel to this communitarian, Durkheimian aspect, we have the synthetic work of prophets. Ntombikte and other leaders were engaged in an ongoing rethinking of the very bases of their community, making creative syntheses between the past as they saw it and the future as they envisaged it, between the practices learnt from their ancestors and those observed from their neighbours. As Dozon argued in a milestone study of prophecy in West Africa (Dozon 1995), 'synthesis' – a concept he uses in a rather Hegelian way – may be a more powerful concept than syncretism to capture the cultural work of prophets, as it suggests a conscious effort to overcome oppositions and dualities, theses and anti-theses. This is what movements such as Kyangyang are trying to achieve in relation not only to Islam and Christianity, but also to modernity and tradition, youths and elders, men and women, Balanta and non-Balanta. They are trying to implement a 'triad' in landscapes of strict dualities, in a search for brokerage, mediation and intercalary figures that has characterized the dualistic societies of the Upper Guinea Coast and anthropological analyses of them (Ferme 2001; McGovern 2011; Sarro 2009).

In terms of joining a religion, Kyangyang offers also an interesting alternative to a strict duality. In West Africa, there are largely two contrasting modes of religious affiliation: 'initiation' and 'conversion'. These are of course ideal types; in practice,

there is a lot of convergence between them. Louis Brenner, in particular, has offered a very good account of how convergent the logics of ritual initiation and of Muslim learning are in Sufi theories of knowledge in Mali (Brenner 2000). He outlines that one can be 'initiated' into Islamic learning as much as one can 'convert' to initiatory cults, but as ideal types conversion and initiation work to map out the distribution of knowledge in most villages and ethnic groups in the region. Kyangyang, however, seems to operate in another register – one that seems more akin to that of Southern African affliction cults than to anything happening in West Africa. One cannot choose to be initiated into it, and one cannot convert into it, no matter how much one may desire to do so. The indigenous view, that of Kyangyang adepts themselves, is that there is no forceful conversion into their religion, nor is it a question of 'will'. When, in April 2016, we asked a Kyangyang leader what the differences between conversion to Christianity or to Islam and conversion to Kyangyang were, he denied that there could be any comparison: 'People who convert to Christianity or to Islam do so because they want to. People who are called by Kyangyang have no saying. It is Nhala who decides you are going to follow that path, and you follow that path.' Ntombikte had put it in virtually the same terms in an interview in 2002:

> Nobody is mobilized into this path on which you see the [Kyangyang] people; if this is going to come onto you, you do not know what day it is going to happen; it falls upon your body and you know that your body is hot (Ntombikte; 2002).

Conclusion

Despite the closing words of the previous section, agency cannot be ruled out of the picture simply because interviewees tend to deny it in their descriptions of Kyangyang. Although becoming a Kyangyang individual is described as something that falls upon you, it ultimately depends on desires en hopes that are also part of human agency, individual and collective. We saw many people in Balanta villages clearly imitating Kyangyang individuals without being themselves spiritually possessed, and pretending to pray with them in the hope, perhaps, that the spirit would fall upon them too. Kyangyang must be put in perspective, understood in its historicity. To use their own metaphor, the spiritual experience of Kyangyang individuals is not a photograph, but a film; they describe their prophetic dreams as images in movement, and often say 'like a film' even though films are rare in the hinterland of Guinea-Bissau. Shadows are always on the move, and through their constant, ecstatic movement, accompanied by dancing and singing and by their material productions (their notebooks full of drawing, their three-dimensional sculptures and buildings, their garments and paraphernalia), they move people's imaginations, offering visual portraits of potential worlds and inscribing them in the public space. Twenty years ago, we could perhaps see their prayers as copies of the prayers of their monotheistic neighbours, but today we can perhaps see them better as part and parcel of a wider process of transformation, of a longer process of learning and becoming.

Prophetic movements like Kyangyang need to be looked at with particular attention because they show two important elements of religious life. Firstly, they show us how relevant the overall spiritual ecology is in understanding specific religious emergence; this invites us to move away from the monism of anthropology of religion and look for the overall plural setting in which specific solutions become meaningful. In that sense,

McGaffey (1983), building upon previous models of plural settings (eg. Kuper and Smith [eds] 1969), offered an exemplary model in his work on Kongo prophets, a study in which particular prophetic movements only become fully meaningful when contrasted with the other ones in the region, each speaking one to the other, much like the elements that make up mythical narratives in Lévi-Straussian structural analyses. Secondly, movements like Kyangyang show us how important the works of imagination and creativity are in the making of religions, and how urgent it is that we pay attention to authors who have offered models of creativity. Whether so-called new religions like Kyangyang ('new' religions that, in many ways, can be regarded as more 'original' than older ones) will succeed or fail like any other 'instant millennium' – as Willis (1970) referred to some African religious movements – depends on many social aspects and historical variables, and will probably only be fully understood once future generations of scholars define what they mean by success and failure in religious experience.

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