

PRIMITIVE RELIGIONS? AFRICA AS A MARKER FOR TRANSFORMATION IN EUROPEAN HISTORY OF RELIGION

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***Abstract:** The 19th and early 20th century European discourse on religion in Africa is coined by colonial taxonomies. While post-colonial criticism raised awareness for this problem, my paper proposes an analysis of the discourse on 'primitive religion' not as a way of analysing religion in Africa, but 'religion' in Europe. The article therefore outlines how writing about religion in Africa reveals Europe's self-representation and the late 19th century study of religion. The discourse on religion is further disclosed as the construction of a world order by positioning the category of «religion» in references to other values, positions and features.*

Key Word: Primitive religions; Africa; Transformation; Europe; History of Religion.

Introduction

Why does a Swiss scholar of religion dare to write about 'primitive religion' in the year 2015? What good is a notion that is both racist and colonial? There are several reasons, why I present this subject in a Ghanaian journal. First of all, I will not write about Africa or African religion at all. I will discuss only 'Africa' as a marker for the European imagery. 'Africa' – that is the image of the continent and its people in the eyes of their observers, which in this case are mostly European missionaries, scholars, travellers, colonialists and merchants. Secondly, I will not speak about religion, but only about 'religion'. This difference is based on a discourse analysis and sociology of knowledge approach which is an indication that, the focus lies in the category of 'religion' as a category of governance, sovereignty and identity building. I will later discuss this difference and the approach I am pursuing.

Before, I proceed, I want to demonstrate that 'primitiveness' is not limited to non-European or non-Western areas but can be found in the historiography of many people, for instance those living in the Swiss mountains. As the British were scrambling for

Africa, they were at the same time scrambling for the Swiss mountains, the Alps. According to some British authors in the 19th century, these people in the Swiss Alps were that ‘primitive’ that they did not even have a prohibition of incest (which for Sigmund Freud was an important cultural element amongst primitive people, at least in his *Totem and Taboo* from 1913).

But not the only British and Alpinists found ‘primitiveness’ in the Alps and replicated the common image of ‘primitiveness’ found in a nature-bound way of living. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a detailed letter about his journey through Switzerland, mentioning nature, the weather, the mountains and their botany intensively but disregarding the people who he deemed to be defined by their lack of culture. Other travellers such as Mary Shelley or the ‘colonizers’ of Switzerland, Napoleon and his administration contributed to this image: “There are savages for whom we have made it our task to enlighten and bring nearer to social advancement.”¹ This is not to appropriate or neglect the discrimination inherent in these notions but to make it visible that the notion ‘primitive’ is a marker that reflects a difference, which will be the subject of the following arguments.

To come back to the methodological arguments for speaking about ‘primitiveness’ and ‘primitive religion’, I want to make it clear that as I write about ‘primitiveness’, I am not applying it as a category to people or individuals. My paper is not about Africa as an actual place, but about the discourse on and the representations of ‘Africa’, “a discursive space to which people can travel only in their imaginations”.² It therefore stands in the tradition of a study of religion that does focus neither on religious truth or exegesis nor on ‘the essential’ behind or in a certain religious tradition.

¹ Cf. Lukas Bärfuss, *Stil und Moral. Essays* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), 9.

² Russell McCutcheon, “Africa on Our Minds,” in *The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion*, ed. Theodore Louis Trost (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 229-237.

Instead I understand the study of religion – which in Europe and the US has been separated from theology or religious studies – as a discipline that also reflects on its own categories with regard to their political dimension. For ‘the West’, this includes an analysis of the category of ‘religion’ as well as the ‘secular’ as categories of governance and sovereignty, as it was recently done.³ This approach does primarily ask what we do as we speak about religion. It considers the discourse on religion as a discourse constituting order. The premise is therefore that while speaking and writing about religion, we organize and structure the world.

The discourse on Africa is a discourse through which (until today) African actors are affected by colonial dichotomies as well as European hegemonies. But it is also a discourse I consider somehow constitutional both for Africa as well as for Europe, even though in very asymmetrical ways. It is my conviction that Africa and Africans were (and still are) crucial for Europe’s self-awareness. And it is exactly this link between Europe and Africa, which I consider central for the discourse on Africa. Again, I am not referring to the continent Africa, but ‘Africa’ as a *trope*, as Eddie Glaude Jr. suggested with regard to the accounts in African American religion.⁴

I am going to read my data – sources from the early and colonial period in the study of religion – with regard to their aspects of self-representation: what are these European scholars saying about themselves, about their science and about modernity, by writing about religion in Africa? In other words, I will try to turn the material, which is focusing on Africa, ‘upside down’ and analyse what this material can tell us about Europe. As such, my primal target is Europe and its self-description.

This linkage between Africa and Europe is in my perspective often neglected or explained anyhow; for instance, as a colonial

³ Trevor Stack, Naomi R. Goldenberg and Timothy Fitzgerald, eds., *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁴ Eddie Glaude, Jr., “Conclusion: ‘Africa’ in the Study of African American Religion,” in *The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion*, ed. Theodore Louis Trost (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 239-250.

discourse about the ‘Other’ – which it is, but not only. My aim is not to flatten the established differences, legitimizing colonial as well as postcolonial violence which lies in the asymmetric connection between ‘Europe’ and ‘Africa’ as well as their represented realities. My aim is to show that this constructed difference tells us something about the producers of this discourse, who are mostly European scholars.

What I want to demonstrate is the importance of the discourse on Africa for the construction of European identities and imaginaries. By speaking about Africa, Europeans were always speaking about themselves, too. By speaking about African or Black religion, they were producing its counterpart – ‘their’ white religion. A religion that William E. B. Du Bois characterized as being organized around the quest to take “ownership over the whole earth, forever and ever.”⁵This is what I call Europe’s black spot or Europe’s unconscious, a term I borrow from the German novelist Jean Paul, who wrote in his last and unfinished novel *Selina* (1827) about “the terrific realm of the unconscious, this real inner Africa”.⁶

In this piece, I want to ask from what sources the early period of the study of religion in Africa can tell us besides the fact that they were racists and colonialists. My aim is to show that they are a solid database to analyse Europe’s imaginary and its identity construction. To come to this end, I first have to go back to the colonial paradigm in the discourse on Africa. I will point out how Africa was always the continent of absence and radical otherness, be it the absence of history, as Hegel put it, of religion or of reason.

In a second step, I am going to focus on the description of religion in Africa in this paradigm of absence. Staying in the colonial period, I am going to line out the history of European scholars

⁵ William E. B. Du Bois, “The souls of white folk,” in *Darkwater. Voices from within the veil* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999), Kindle Edition.

⁶ Cf. Ludger Lütkehaus, ed., *Dieses wahre innere Afrika. Texte zur Entdeckung des Unbewussten vor Freud* (Giessen: Psychosozial Verlag, 2005), 77.

speaking about religion in Africa, particularly during the 19th century. We will see that Europeans did not always ‘see’ religion in Africa. In contrary, they were for a long time denying that there was religion in Africa at all. Of course, this brings up the question of how, when and why religion was ‘discovered’ in Africa, a question whose answer obviously will not be found in Africa, but where this observation was made: in various study rooms in Europe.

Here, the term ‘primitive religion’ works as an identity marker as many others. I will try to show that, by speaking about Africa, European scholars were always also speaking about Europe, authorizing their worldview and defining crucial notions or categories such as ‘science’, ‘religion’ or ‘rationality’. By putting everything in order – Europe, Africa, religion, science, rationality, etc. – they were establishing their order of the world, their worldview. So this is what the whole discourse on ‘primitive religion’ is about: consolidating what non-primitiveness is and thereby maintaining Europe’s hegemonic place in the world. This is part of the modern European mythopoeic landscape in which the discourse on religion plays a crucial role in creating an order of the world. In the last part of the paper, I want to line out some trends that somehow help to deconstruct this colonial history.

I. The Paradigm of the Yoke

As the French Africanist Jean-François Bayart pointed out some years ago, though we now have more than hundred years of Africanist research, it is still not possible to understand that African societies were just as all other societies. As Bayart says, it is still not possible to describe African societies in their banality, even in their political banality.⁷ Discourses on Africa center more than often on what can be called radical otherness. The image of this

⁷ Jean-François Bayart, *L'État en Afrique. La Politique du Ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), 19. Originally published as *The State in Africa. The Politics of the Belly* (London - New York: Longman, 1993).

continent was and in a large part still is as much a Western fantasy as the Orient that Edward Said and others denounced.

In *The State in Africa*, Bayart speaks of a ‘paradigm of the yoke’, which hindered European thinkers to recognize the historicity of African societies. Bayart takes the yoke as a specific symbol for the European discourse on Africa, from the pre-colonial period until, in some ways, up to today.

One of the aspects of this paradigm is the idea of the absence of history in Africa, which has a long history, rooting as much in the Bible as in scientific debates through the 18th, 19th and 20th century. So, let us historicize the absence of history. The denial of history can be traced down to the Bible and the story of Noah and Ham, probably one of the most decisive biblical passages for the history of colonialism, giving both a legitimation for domination and enslavement. As Genesis 9: 21-27 tells, after Ham has seen his father Noah naked, Noah cursed Ham and all his descendants to be the slave of his brothers. This story was widely used to legitimize the enslavement of the ‘black sons of Ham’. Here, the symbol of the yoke exemplifies that this narrative is centred on slavery, servanthood, oppression, submission and sinful existence. As a scholar in the academic study of religion, I will not discuss such a passage with regard to their theological interpretation, but as a narrative, that was used for specific (colonial) politics.

In the context of the theory of Hamitic dependency, African people were dehumanized in various ways. For instance, portrayed as beast-like and monstrous, a framework that the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe has characterized as part of the meta-text on Africa.⁸ A look at the racial controversy in the United States, exemplary in 2014 and 2015 in Ferguson and other places show that these portrayals of black people as monsters still exist, if one takes the Ferguson policeman as an example who claimed that the young black man he killed was coming onto him

⁸ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley - London: University of California, 2001), 1.

with a demon-like face. Obiome Nnameka contributed to this debate with an analysis of black bodies in the mythmaking framework of white supremacy.⁹

Central to this paradigm of the yoke in modern times was the absence of history, famously remarked by Hegel in his philosophy of history (1830s). There, he says: “What we properly understand by Africa, is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History.” Here, the European inability to recognize the historicity of African societies finds its clearest testimony. This part of the asymmetrically shared history between Africa and Europe has been mentioned and analysed by various scholars, for instance Basil Davidson, who focused on the linkage between history and the nation-state.¹⁰ More recently, Nicolas Sarkozy pointed out in Dakar in 2007, that “the tragedy of Africa is that the African man has not yet fully entered history”.¹¹ Of course, this speech provoked harsh reactions both from African as well as from European intellectuals. But it also shows that one can easily reproduce Hegel’s image of Africa, today.

But maybe it was true that Africa did not ‘possess’ history, or should we rather say, this specific Eurocentric history? To put it differently: Africans were forced into a history that was exogenous. In this view, Hegel’s remark of Africa without history becomes a sign for the exogenous periodization of history to which Africa is a subject.

As several authors, Africans and Europeans, have pointed out, this paradigm of the yoke did not cease with the end of colonialism, as the Congolese philosopher Valentin Y. Mudimbe has

⁹ Obiome Nnameka, “Body’s that don’t matter: Black Bodies and the European Gaze,” in *Mythen, Subjekte, Masken: Kritische Weisheitsforschung in Deutschland*, eds. Maureen M. Eggers et al. (Münster: Unrast, 2005), 90-104.

¹⁰ Basil Davidson, *The Black Man’s Burden. Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2005), 21-51.

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Chrétien, ed., *L’Afrique de Sarkozy. Un déni d’histoire* (Paris: Karthala, 2008), 195.

shown.¹² But the writing of history always has been a crucial issue for African intellectuals. If we look at the era of independence in African countries, the writing of history has become a key issue. For Ghana and concerning the new African renaissance, one is reminded of Kwame Nkrumah who once said that:

In the new African renaissance, we place great emphasis on the presentation of history. Our history needs to be written as the history of our society, not as the story of European adventures. African society must be treated as enjoying its own integrity; its history must be a mirror of that society, and the European contact must find its place in this history only as an African experience, even if as a crucial one.¹³

Here, Nkrumah explicitly argues that Africans have to escape this exogenous periodization of history. Other authors like the Senegalese intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop has developed specific Afrocentric versions of history, which ironically, were then targeted by European historians as being mythopoetic. Surely a critique of Diop's conception of history is appropriate since he confuses creation and borrowing and therefore creates a diffusionist problem. But the Diop case also shows the asymmetric criticism of European scholars towards two sides of the same (diffusionist) problem. While Diop's version was criticized as Afrocentric, the narrative placing Egypt in an European-Hellenist trajectory was not likewise criticized.

The constraint to be inscribed into a history that came from Europe had manifold consequences. One was the question, whether the European notion of 'religion' should be applied to Africa?

II. The Discovery of Religion in Africa

Until the mid-19th century, there 'was' no religion in Africa. Most scholars were very clear that (the people in Africa had no

¹² Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Oxford: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹³ Kwame Nkrumah, "Society and Ideology," in *Consciencism. Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization* (New York: Monthly Review, 1970), 63.

religion. This was the consensus until the late 19th century.¹⁴ As David Chidester has shown in his book *Savage Systems*, the notion of religion was widely used in colonial wars to dehumanize African people.¹⁵ More specifically: who had no religion, was not fully human, what legitimated colonization and ‘improvement’, religiously or otherwise. Chidester showed how, on a colonial frontier, people were first denied religion. After the colonial forces have conquered them, the same authors described the same people as having religion, or at least some kind of. This is where categories such as ‘primitive religion’, ‘magic’ or the ‘primal forms of religious life’ come to work. Were these people again uprising? Or were they fighting the colonizers, the same scholars were denying had a religion? The formula for this strategy can be summed up in the following way: who is against us, has no religion. With this, the category of religion became part of the colonial strategy to dehumanize Africans. This denial of religion was not limited to the colonial frontier, as also armchair anthropologists and historians of religion in the European metropolises replicated these dichotomies widely during the 19th century, without having put their feet on African soil.

Towards the end of the 19th century, these debates took another form. More scholars were discussing whether, in Africa, there is some kind of religion. For example, the evolutionist and friend of Charles Darwin, the British scholar Sir John Lubbock apologizes in 1870 to his European readers for speaking of ‘religion’ when he is speaking about Africans but also other so-called primitive peoples. He explains to his readers because he assumes it to pose some problems for his readers to connect “these unready and imperfect believes” to the category of religion.¹⁶ To calm his readers, he assures them that, he will leave out the points that will be aggravating for them. But what happened when Lubbock and other

¹⁴ Cf. David Atwood, “The Discourse of Primal Religion: Disentangling Regimes of Truth,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, forthcoming.

¹⁵ David Chidester, *Savage Systems. Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

¹⁶ John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Men* (New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1898), 205.

scholars were starting to write about the ‘religion’ of primitive people? Where do we find the answer to such a crucial change in the study of religion that goes from the absence of religion in Africa to its existence, and soon, its omnipresence? Do we find the answer in Africa? Of course not, Africa does change, but not from a nonreligious to a fully religious continent in less than thirty years. So the answer for this change must lie in Europe, more specifically in the scientific dealing with the category of religion and its application to non-European cultures.

One thing we observe here is the enlargement of the notion of religion. This is one element of the shift to describe Africa as having religion. We always have to keep in mind, that for European scholars, ‘religion’ was until the mid-18th century usually only labelling four ‘types’: Islam, Judaism, Christianity and ‘heathendom’. So we can observe the enlargement of the category of religion, as Europeans ‘discovered’ for instance Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and many other ‘religions’. This contributed to the enlargement of the understanding of religions in the plural. But that is not the entire story. The reason for Europeans to speak about ‘African religion’ is also to be found in the differentiation of scientific approaches to religion and is thus reflecting the change in the modern imagery.

With the differentiation between a religious and a scientific study of religion I refer to the following: at the same time that there were more people speaking about religion in Africa, there were also ambitions to form a ‘scientific’ or ‘academic’ study of religion which would not stay in the theological and therefore Christocentric paradigm but be scientifically ‘objective’, according to their own epistemic values. This shift lies, in my understanding, around the years 1880 to 1890.¹⁷ What can be observed in these materials is the differentiation, or better, the separation between ‘science’ and ‘religion’. For example, in France, the state founded

¹⁷ David Atwood, “Die Religion der Anderen. Zur Diskursgeschichte der frühen Religionsforschung,” in *Erfassen – Deuten – Urteilen. Empirische Zugänge zur Religionsforschung*, eds. Andreas Heuser, Claudia Hoffmann and Tabitha Walther (Zürich: TVZ, 2013), 367-382.

a non-theological study of religion, which was then labelled ‘scientific’ or ‘academic’. Of course, these authors who contributed to the early discipline of the study of religion were not ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ any more than theologians. But they had different epistemological value systems; For instance, the discursive separation of ‘religion’ and ‘science’ or the separation between state and church, as it was some years later established in the French *laïcité*.

But what does this matter for the discourse on Africa? One could argue that this is a completely inner-European transformation and it would be true. But if we analyse the European discourse on Africa, these transformations matter. To give a precise example, I will refer to Albert Réville, the first French professor in the study of history of religion at the *Collège de France* from 1879 onwards. He published two volumes in 1880 that dealt with *The Religion of Non-Civilized People*.¹⁸

In these two volumes, Réville argued strongly against the thesis that African people had no religion. For him, “religion is the determination of human life through the sense of a link between human spirit and a mystic spirit”. This is a step towards a formal and broad category, ‘religion’ that does need neither ‘God’ nor scriptures to define it. This formalization is enabled partly by the discursive separation between religious and scientific speech, something Albert Réville highlighted while of course claiming to do ‘scientific’ research.

That a scholar now starts to speak about religion in Africa could render us to think that he did not speak of Africa in the usual colonial manner. Thus, his way of writing about Africans was less dehumanizing and that somehow the discourse on Africa became less brutal and less connected to white supremacy. This is not the case, but it shows something that is typical for the discourse on Africa. Although Réville was criticizing authors who denied that there is religion in Africa, he was equally denying other

¹⁸ Albert Réville, *Histoire des Religions. Les Religions des Peuples Non-Civilisés*, (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher 1883, vol. II).

categories such as rationality, culture and civilization. This was evident in the title of the two volumes of *The Religion of Non-Civilized People*. So, the transformation in the European academy, the enlargement of the category of religion as well as the discursive separation of a religious and scientific ways of speaking about religion had precise effects on the discourse on Africa. While religion on the one hand and science and rationality on the other hand were separated, religion could be ‘given’ to Africa, whereas these European scholars made it very clear that Europeans ‘were’ still presumed as the only civilized, cultivated and rational thinking people. This is a discursive strategy I call *dichotomic actualization*, meaning that although African people are less dehumanized, the dichotomy between the European and the ‘radically different’ African is maintained.

Another illustration for such a dichotomic actualization is to be seen in the works of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, the author of ‘primitive mentality’. He acknowledges that there is religion amongst what he calls ‘primitive people’ but assures his European reader that there is no true rationality, only something slightly comparable that he labels “prelogic mentality”.¹⁹ There is nevertheless a relativization of the absolute difference as Lévy-Bruhl acknowledges in his last *Notebooks* that those “mental functions” are to be found everywhere – in Europe particularly amongst peasants and workers.²⁰ Of course, discriminating analogies – Africans, women, peasants, workers, etc. – are maintained, but the constructed difference between a primitive and a non-primitive or civilized mentality became at least fluid. Still, this shows how the old dichotomy between having religion and having no religion was replaced by the question of having rationality.

Similar, the French ethnographer and colonial agent Maurice Delafosse wrote in 1925: “There is no institution in Africa, be it in the social domain, in the political domain or even in the economic sector that does not rest on a religious concept or does not have religion as a corner block. These people who were once

¹⁹ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La Mentalité Primitive* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

²⁰ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Carnets*, ed. Bruno Karsenti (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1998).

denied as having a religion are amongst the most religious on earth.”²¹ Is he looking on Africa favourably? If we take his description of Africa as defined by religion, the contrast to Europe becomes obvious, as Europe is considered rather as defined by scientific and technological progress, or with regard to religion: more or less ‘secularized’. Hence, the image of the ‘radically different’ since totally religious ‘Africa’, which dominates popular images today, becomes at least ambivalent. It becomes, again, a dichotomic actualization of an older difference.

In my research, I focused on the analysis of different European positions in the discourse on Africa. This perspective made it possible to distinguish different positions of speakers. For instance, were missionaries and theologians not willing to separate the categories ‘religion’ and ‘rationality’? In their worldview, did the two belong together? These authors were for a long time denying that neither religion nor rationality existed amongst Africans. The way European scholars wrote about Africans and their religion therefore revealed a lot about their own worldview, but probably not that much about Africans.

Analysing the history of the category, ‘primitive religion’, aimed at a deconstruction of ‘European’ historiography of religion. This perspective on colonial history looks at the European side of the discourse – at the producers and how their products reflect on their worldview. My approach therefore aims at an understanding and recognition that ‘Africa’ was always part of European history as well as Europe’s unconscious and not only that but Europe was and still is part of African’s history.

The shift from denial to the asserted omnipresence of religion in Africa tells us something about Europe’s self-imagination. Again, that there were emerging strands of the discourse, people who claim to speak scientifically and not religiously about religion.

²¹ Maurice Delafosse, *Les Civilisations Négro-africaine* (Paris: Librairie Stock, 1925), 9.

This discursive renovation reverberates deeply in the history of religion in Africa.

I still do not think that this is the end of such an inquiry. In my last point, I want to ask how we can deal with categories from a colonial historiography of religion such as ‘fetishism’ or ‘tribalism’ that is usually associated with the so-called primitive cultures.

III. How Primitive is Modernity?

Even though most of the colonial categories and taxonomies around ‘primitive religion’ are excluded from the contemporary language in the study of religion – and not just since the postcolonial critique, they are coming back in peculiar and unexpected ways. This includes particularly notions such as ‘fetishism’ or ‘tribalism’. There are several examples of self-appropriations of some of the most notorious categories from the colonial period of the study of religion. One of the founders of science studies, Bruno Latour, published in 2009, a book with the title *On the Modern Cult of the Fetish Gods*. In this book, he analyses the modern’s will to denounce the ‘fetish’ icon as a construct yet at the same time insisting on the facticity of ‘factish’ icons.²² Or note the German literary critic Hartmut Böhme who brought out a book in 2006 entitled *Fetishism and Culture. A Different Theory of Modernity*.²³ One could further refer to the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli who wrote about postmodern tribalism in Europe.²⁴ The notable aspect here is that these authors did not write about former so-called ‘primitive cultures’ but about Europe and modernity. So, who is now primitive? Instead of relinquishing those notions from the vocabulary of a study of religion, one could also turn them back on their producers.

²² Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Fetish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

²³ Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur. Eine andere Theorie der Moderne* (Reinbek: Rowolth, 2006).

²⁴ Michel Maffesoli, *Le Temps des Tribus* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1988).

These examples are ways of dealing with a semantic past that screams ‘colonialism and racism’, where it is obvious that there is something ‘radically different’ but then cut these categories back to the producers of this discourse. Notwithstanding that all three named scholars offer highly nuanced theories of religion in modernity, the application of notions such as ‘fetishism’ or even ‘primitive religion’ offers ways of turning the evolutionary teleology on its head. Instead of writing the history of religions from ‘primal’ or ‘elementary’ to ‘more sophisticated’ forms of religious life, the application of categories usually used for ‘primal’ religions offer models to (re-)write history with regard to a simultaneous non-simultaneity, as the German historian Reinhart Koselleck argued for.²⁵ This could depict ways of writing the history of religion in Europe and in Africa as an entangled history where authors not only describe their objects but also construct self-descriptive imageries well beyond the processed issue. Such a focus on the history of religion should analyse the positioning in time as an identity producing strategy that is part of the data rather than it link with the historiography of religion itself. In other words, the history of religion forms another item for the historiography of ‘religion’ as a discourse constituting order.

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²⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, *Future Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979).