Abstract

The creation and development of an African Christian image of God is the main topic of this article. Through studies of the Dii people and Norwegian missionaries in North Cameroon the study seeks to explore how the social background of the two participants in this worldview encounter influenced the image of God which they brought to ‘the long conversation’ of conversion to Christianity. The supreme God of the Dii universe, Tayyi, was presented by the the Dii informants as a distant force which organised society and was a fence against chaos. Gud, the Norwegian version of a Christian God, is through the mission sources portrayed as a freedom-loving, civilised deity who demanded certain technical skills from the believers.

Keywords: Anthropology of God, Dii, Norwegian mission, Cameroon, social constructivism

Introduction

But they [the Dii] knew. The creator God existed, but since they had not seen him… it is exactly as the children of Israel did… in the desert. Moses took us here, and he left us here, we were about to die from starvation, from thirst… and he went somewhere… where we could not find him. Then they created a God. And they created the golden calf. It is exactly the same thing.

My question to the old Dii evangelist concerning his ancestors’ image of God did not seem too difficult to answer. The supreme God of his forefathers was, of course, the same God as he worshipped as a Christian today, and the narrative universe of the Old Testament did not only apply to the Hebrews, it was also shared by the evangelist, as well as the Dii people on the Adamaoua plateau in northern Cameroon prior to the arrival of Muslim and Christian missionaries.

This article is an attempt to shed light on a much debated theme, the image of God in Africa. In this debate the African academic pioneers John S. Mbiti and E. B. Idowu have convinced a generation of African and European scholars of the similarities between the Christian image of God and the image of the supreme God in the different African traditional religions. My own contribution to the debate has the following question as a starting point: Is the image of God among African Christians a theological
construction inherited from the missionaries, or is it an evolution of traditional African cosmology? I obviously do not have space and time to answer such an immense question in one single article, but I will present a case-study which brings into the open the premises for this ‘long conversation’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991) which emerged between European missionaries and the local population in colonial Africa. I will try to analyse what I have called the ‘anthropology of God’ found in the historical encounter between the Dii people and Norwegian missionaries in northern Cameroon, and I will question to what extent the two religious traditions have projected their social organisation into their image of God.

The article will start with a short introduction to methodology and to the study of African Traditional Religion. Secondly I will direct my attention towards the case-study from northern Cameroon. In this part the image of God will first be described from the viewpoint of the Dii generation which experienced the arrival of the Christian missionaries, and who will give their presentation of the traditional religious practices they experienced during their childhood. Then the writings of the Norwegian missionaries working in the area will be analysed in order to see how they implicitly present their image of God through their activities and theological analyses. Finally some conclusions will be drawn concerning ‘the anthropology of God’ and the two actors’ historical contributions to defining their theological positions in what was to become ‘the long negotiation’ of an African Christian image of God.

Methodological consideration

The interviews and the archival sources which this study is based upon were identified through my historical study of conversion to Christianity among the Dii people on the so-called Dii-plain in the Adamaua region in northern Cameroon from 1934 to 1960 (Drønen 2009). During my archive studies of missionary self-representation and my encounters with the pioneer Dii Christians, I realised that the image of God was a symbolic battlefield which was of importance to define both for the first Dii converts and for the theologically trained missionaries. My primary aim with this follow up study is not to analyse theology as such, or the outcome of the Dii-mission encounter, but rather to use insights from sociology and anthropology of religion in an attempt to show how the premises for the religious dialogue were marked by the temporal and spatial consciousness of the actors. Together with James A. Beckford (2003) I will argue that the most fruitful approach towards analysing religious change is to give priority to questions which concern processes involving negotiations over the meaning of social phenomena, and try to discover how terms such as ‘religion’, ‘spiritual’, and ‘sacred’ are used, how the uses vary over time, and how it reflects collective interests (Beckford 2003: 193).

The recent increase in interest for the historical drama which took place between Christian missionaries from Europe and the local population in colonial Africa is largely due to the Comaroffs’ influential two volume work Of Revelation and Revolution (1991 and 1997) and the debate which followed where J. D. Y. Peel and Terence
Ranger played important roles. Both Peel (1995) and Ranger (see Comaroff 1997: 51–53) questioned what they interpreted as the ‘missing’ indigenous voice in such a detailed study about conversion in colonial Africa. I will not take sides in that particular debate here, but I will pay attention to Peel and Ranger’s focus on local traditions and relate it to the Comaroffs’ image of conversion as a ‘long conversation.’ I will try to show that my informants’ awareness of the historical roots of their image of God portrays them as active participants in this conversation which made them contribute to the content of the new religion. The same way I will argue that the Norwegian missionaries presented a deity to the local population which was formed in the image of their social and spatial surroundings, by a Norwegian version of enlightenment ideas and ‘civilising mission’.

The missionaries’ self-presentation of their work is described in detail in the conference reports which were produced annually and sent to the mission board in Norway. In addition they regularly wrote articles to Misjonstidende, a newspaper which was published weekly during the period under study.¹ I have earlier, with reference to Marianne Gullestad (2007) and Erving Goffmann (1959), called the public articles ‘frontstage publications’ whereas the conference reports, which were meant for the board only, should be regarded as ‘backstage publications.’ When analysing the archive material this distinction has to be kept in mind in order to understand the nature and purpose of the written texts.

Some words also have to be added about the Dii sources. Locally produced written sources about Dii traditional religion are hard to find, and no such sources have been located from the time before the arrival of Islam in the first decades of the 19th century. Only Frobenius’ short report published in 1925 gives a somewhat systematic presentation of some Dii rituals as practised before the arrival of the Norwegian missionaries (Frobenius 1987). In the five villages where I did my fieldwork in 2004 and 2005 I depth-interviewed 15 Christians and six Dii Muslims who had experienced the arrival of the missionaries, and I have chosen to keep my informants anonymous in order not to create tension within the sensitive field of religious and ethnic identity in this small ethnic group which today numbers approximately 50,000 people (Muller 2002: 13). During the fieldwork I observed that very little was left of public traditional Dii religion, and the elders who organised the traditional feasts argued that what they practised was merely tradition, and that no one believed in it anymore. This leaves us with the living memory of those who experienced the major changes that occurred with the arrival of the missionaries as our main source of information on the practices and the dogmatic content of Dii traditional religion. Their memories do, however, only cover a few decades, and when we compare the fragments of what they remember with Frobenius’ report which was probably based on travels in the region from 1910–1912 (Frobenius 1987: 7), we realise that significant changes occurred from 1910 to 1960. This should make us very reluctant to draw conclusions as to a non-historical interpretation of African Traditional Religion. I agree with Yves Person (1993: 18) who argues that much writing on African Traditional Religion lacks an historical approach and therefore fails to describe the changes which occurred over time.
How do we study African Traditional Religion?

Several authors have pointed to the fact that the term African Traditional Religion is a Western construct, and that most African languages do not have a word which describes the cultural practices for which our everyday term is religion (Ray 2000: xii; Mbiti 1999: 2). This is also the case with the Dii language, where the closest one can get to the term religion is the word dina, an adoption of the Fulbe diina (Muller 2002: 11–12). This word is of Arab origin, originally describing religious practices in the Muslim world, but in the Dii context the term has developed into a common denominator for the practice of African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity. In the early colonial period descriptions of African religion, and often lack of religion (Chidester 1996: 11–16), was limited to travellers’ and missionaries’ reports and were later followed by articles and books written by ethnographers and anthropologists who based their studies on the former’s findings.

The academic development within this new field followed two different tracks. The first track was created by lengthy field-studies which were published by scholars like Geoffrey Parrinder and Placide Tempels, examples of missionaries who became interested in the religious practices of the people they tried to evangelise (Westerlund 1985: 18). The second track emerged in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s when African scholars themselves entered the academic stage and ‘wrote back’ the African point of view. The two most influential writers were John S. Mbiti and E. Bolaji Idowu, two African theologians who set out to defend African traditions and philosophy against descriptions that they experienced as «inadequate, derogatory and prejudicial» (Mbiti 1999: 7). The scholarly crusade of these theologians also included the dogmatic fight for the African perception of God, not just by describing the fact that most Africans are aware of a distant high-God, but by comparing the image of God in Africa to the Hebrew concept of God, and stating that a) God is real to Africans, b) God is unique, and c) God is the absolute controller of the universe (Idowu 1973: 146–155). Mbiti’s books African Religions and Philosophy (1999) and Concepts of God in Africa (1970), together with Idowu’s African Traditional Religion (1973) have become classics in milieus of theological training all over Africa, and even today I often hear echoes of Mbiti and Idowu when discussing theology with African students both in Cameroon and in Norway. But not all African scholars were Christian apologists. The Ugandan atheist scholar and novelist Okot p’Bitek attacked both Christian apologists and African nationalists claiming that they «attempt to show that the African peoples were as civilized as the Western peoples. They dress up African deities with Hellenic robes and parade them before the Western world» (p’Bitek 1970: 41).

This brief overview of approaches towards the study of African Traditional Religion leads me back to my initial question, how can we study the image of God in Africa when the focus of the study is historical change? To clarify this question two brief points have to be made. First, in order to study change among the Dii and the Norwegian missionaries their cultural practices have to be studied according to self-presentation. In order to do that I will lean heavily on Peter Berger (1969), his cooperation with Thomas Luckmann (1967), and James A. Beckford (2003) and adopt a social construc-
tionalist approach towards the study of religion. The Dii religion will be presented as a comprehensive meaning system (what Berger and Luckmann calls worldview) or, if so preferred, an isolated plausibility structure. Their practices will as such be used as an example of African Traditional Religion the same way the religion practised by the Norwegian missionaries will be presented as an example of Christianity. I would, however, like to underscore the generic approach of my study through a focus on the image of God which is presented from different angles in the two religious traditions, bearing in mind Beckford’s pragmatic approach to the study of everyday religious practices:

There are no permanent points of anchorage for conceptualisations or definitions of religions. They depend on the active work of human beings – through the medium of institutions, organisations, movements and groups – to constitute religion as particular kinds of things for practical purposes (Beckford 2003: 214).

This statement leads me to my second point, inspired by the French Africanist Yves Person (1993), where I would like to add that religion first of all is language, a language which often is expressed as rites, organised through liturgy, which again is a presentation of gestures which symbolise beliefs. Person argues that any historical study of religion should have as its starting point the religious service, and from there move on to dogma, and not the other way around. African religious practices should therefore be studied according to four headlines, rites, goal, dogma, and function (Person 1993: 19). My contention is that historians interested in religious change should pay particular attention to the practical purposes of religious ideas and study how people argue, through verbal and material discourses, in favour of maintenance of existing structures or in favour of change, and in the following Dii traditional religion and Norwegian missionary Christianity will be briefly presented with these considerations in mind.

Dii Cosmology: Myth, Tayyi and Ancestors

Our ancestors used to live on this mountain named Mgbang Sii. They lived in several different villages that were all equal. No one decided over the others. When the Fulbe from Rey-Bouba arrived, they tried to conquer us by starvation. They cut our harvest before it was ripe. But our ancestors made reservoirs of the grain ‘sàd’, an herb whose grains are very small and which was the first culture known among the Dii (Muller 1992: 4).

Like most ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa the Dii oral tradition has several myths of origin which are connected to a supreme deity, to geography, and to elements in the relatively recent past. This Dii myth of creation is the story of a paradise lost, of the idealised past on the mountain Mbang Sii, where the Dii lived in peace before the arrival of the Muslim Fulbe army. The Muslim expansion was a result of Usman dan Fodio’s jihad which started in Sokoto in Nigeria in 1804 (Njeuma 1978), and tells us something about the temporal relativity of this narrative genre. The importance of the holy mountain also points to geography as one important aspect of the communication
between humans and the supreme deity, and we might even speak of the spatial element of the image of Tayii.

This is but one example of Dii religious practices and beliefs which are shared by the majority of sub-Saharan traditional religions. Their supreme God, Tayii, is also presented as the immanent creator of all things and the transcendent ruler who does not interfere with creation unless a major crisis threatens the society of adherents. John Mbiti (1970) claims that one shared characteristic among most African images of a supreme God is that he is simultaneously immanent and transcendent. He also carries names which indicate his power and greatness, such as, among others, «the Wise One», «the big Eye», «the Powerful One» (Mbiti 1970: 3–7). Among my informants there were different opinions as to the image of God in Dii traditional religion, but they confirmed Mbiti’s concept of a simultaneously immanent and transcendent deity. The majority of the informants also agreed to the fact that a supreme God existed within traditional Dii cosmology prior to the arrival of Islam and the missionaries, but they only had vague ideas about this tradition. They argued that people did not know how to contact this deity, and therefore made their invocations through the gbaa (the family altar), thereby confirming the transcendence of their God. Other informants had more precise descriptions of the Dii supreme God. They claimed that the name Tayii, derived from taa yip, means ‘he who thinks and thereby creates’. They had a clear idea of Tayii as the creator who had retired from his creation and thus became the unknown God that could only be reached through the ancestral spirits. This latter group also presented Tayii as simultaneously immanent, recognisable through and present in nature.

They believed that God was on the mountain… in a big river. They believed that God was present in a big rock, in a cave or a in a cavern, in profound waters… in general, the Dii thought that God was present in all things that were important and frightening.

The informant cited here also said that many had the idea that God lived under the earth, since this was where the dead were buried, and thus the home of the ancestors. This notion is shared by Frobenius (1987) who, due to the offering of blood into a hole in the ground, concluded that the Dii located their God under the surface of the earth (Frobenius 1987: 142).

It should also be mentioned that the informants with the clearest ideas about God in Dii traditions were the most theologically educated, and among those who had been most frequently in contact with the missionaries. This supports Ray’s argument that «most African concepts of God … bear the imprint of Christian and Islamic concepts» (Ray 2000: xiv). It is also worth noticing that several informants spoke of Tayii as the unknown God, a term much used by the missionaries with reference to Paul’s Areopagus performance (Acts 17: 16–34). Are these sources evidence enough to claim that the idea of a supreme God existed among the Dii prior to the arrival of the Muslims around 1830 and the Christian missionaries a century later? The content of my interviews together with Frobenius’ description from 1910, gives me reason to suggest that some kind of idea of a supreme God existed among the Dii prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity. The semantic origin of the naming of God, Tayii, also speaks in favour of
old roots of the concept. It is, however, clear that the missionaries, through their focus on the unknown God, and the Fulbe who gradually shared their holy Islamic scriptures with the Dii, influenced the image of Tayii among the Dii, and it is also evident that the ideas of Mbiti and Idowu, through seminars and Bible-schools have helped ‘christianise’ the traditional Dii conception of God.

Dii Religious Practices

Having stated that Dii traditional religion recognised a *force vitale* (Thomas and Luneau 2004), a force that was the origin and sustainer of all things, we will in the following take a closer look at man’s place in Dii cosmology, and his/her relation to this force. My interviews show that the religious specialists (the chief, the circumciser, and the blacksmith) together with the ancestors played an important role in everyday religious life. The fact that Tayii was a transcendent deity who could not be contacted directly increased the importance of the religious specialists in the organisation of everyday life. The annual ritual cycle of Dii tradition started with *hen lugud*, the rite that marked the start of the planting of the sorghum seeds. The main focus of the rite was to call upon the ancestors in order for them to bless fields and secure good harvest. The circumcisers, who were responsible for the rite, initiated the rite by brewing beer, whereas the chief announced the time when people could start the planting of the new seeds. The whole village was invited to help the chief with his fields, and following the invocation to the ancestors made by the circumciser, the work could begin. After a celebration in the chief’s compound, followed by a community meal, each family repeated the rite before their family altar before sowing their fields.

The next public gathering was the rite of maturity, a sacrifice which was offered to the supreme God in order to ensure fertility and blessings for the whole village. This sacrifice was organised before the sorghum was ripe, when it had reached a shoulder’s height, and according to Frobenius this was the most important public communication between the male Dii and the supreme God (Frobenius 1987: 142). The chief of the village, within three days of the new moon, collected a white ram, cut the throat and poured the blood into a hole in the ground. The chief then addressed his invocations to the deity, asking for blessings.

The third rite was what many of my informants referred to as the most important rite during their childhood. The harvest feast was celebrated when the sorghum was ripe.

I particularly remember the sorghum-feast, especially when we wanted to start consuming the first harvest… the people did not eat the food like they do nowadays … In every village people came to them [the circumcisers or blacksmiths] to ask them to start the invocations because people were starving… ‘You must pray so that we can eat’ … The inyam, the beans, the sorghum, we waited for it to be ripe… then they organised the feast, they organised it together with the village chief.
To eat from the new harvest before the circumcisers or the blacksmiths had performed the rite which allowed consumption was connected to severe danger and often led to sickness and accidents. The guardians of traditions usually initiated the rite by collecting some inyam, beans and sorghum and placed them close to the altar of the chief and around the jar that hid the knives used for circumcision. The circumcisers then sprinkled both the altar and the jar with the sad mixture (sorghum and water) and this ceremony finished when the chief blessed his family (Muller 2002: 20). This phase of the rite was followed by celebration in the villages where the men started hitting the traditional Dii bells, and where women and children took part in the singing and the dancing. This was the sign that people could start consuming the harvest, but before eating each family had to repeat the sacrifice to the ancestors at the family altar.

In addition, med yaga, ‘sprinkle the instruments’ (Muller 2002: 22), and the male circumcision, were important public Dii rites which gathered the village and were organised by the religious specialists. Med yaga was organised in order for the chief to transmit the blessings of the ancestors to the weapons before the hunting season could start, and the circumcision ceremony initiated the young Dii boys to the religious secrets of the clan.

Ray, in his study Symbol, Ritual, and Community, focuses on the fact that African individual identity first of all is linked to being a member of a larger community, citing Mbiriti’s famous words «I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.» (Ray 2000: 92). This feeling of belonging is not just related to the close living family or the extended African family, but as much to dead relatives who continue to exist as spirits and the supreme God who controls the cosmos. Dii cosmology thus contained strong relations between the living and the dead, since the dead were closer to the force vitale and thereby could guarantee access to the blessings and protection that this force provided. Of importance is to note that the religious specialists were the only people who could act as bridges between the village and the spiritual force during the important rites, and the daily sacrifices were each family’s repetition of the contact initiated through the rites. The specialists thus had to be treated with respect in order to avoid sanctions both from the specialists, and from the ancestors.

Jean-Claude Muller has called these rites «the backbone of Dii society» (Muller 1996: 102) taking the structuralism position claiming that religion first of all is a means to organise social life, but I would argue that ancestor worship among the Dii cannot be explained only as a way to maintain social structures. To call upon the ancestors was also a way in which the Dii did seek to organise life according to a religious mood in order to establish contact with the supreme being who was the source of all blessings and at the same time was their fence against chaos. Dii cosmology or worldview, where religion was the most important element, was thus constructed with an inherent logic. Within this logic some unexplainable (for the outsider) practices such as the sprinkling of flour and water belonged to a symbolic vertical axis which provided blessings and protection due to contact with the divine, communicated through a medium. If this medium was not treated with respect the same inherent logic made man suffer from the malcontent of the medium. The ancestral spirits were both part of the world of the living and that of the supreme God. These spirits also influenced another important
element of Dii cosmology, which was the horizontal axis where magic and sorcery
were elements which regulated the relationship between individuals. Dii cosmology
was thus a defined, but not closed, system where man through his analytic capacities
placed himself in relation to powers larger than himself.

Missionary Cosmology: Gud and Material Progress

In 1925 the first Norwegian missionaries arrived in Ngaoundéré where they started
building a mission station on a hill a few kilometres from the Muslim city centre. The
background for the general engagement with Sudan in Scandinavia was the interna-
tional mission conference in Edinburgh 1910, where the ‘apostle-belt’ strategy was
introduced. The idea was to establish a ‘belt’ of mission-stations across sub-Saharan
Africa to prevent Islam from expanding further south. The focus of the conference was
not to evangelise Muslims, but rather to reach the ‘pagans’ with the Gospel before
Islam (Nikolaisen and Endresen 1949: 296; Sauer 2005). The focus of the Norwegian
missionaries in Ngaoundéré was therefore to work among the pagan Mboum, and not
the Muslim Fulbe.

The first years the Norwegian missionaries were busy with construction and lan-
guage learning, they therefore depended on evangelists from the South to start their
work among the Mboum. But the people attending the meetings in Ngaoundéré these
first years were mainly construction workers and people from the south, and it soon
became clear that the Mboum in Ngaoundéré were much more influenced by Islam
than first assumed. The missionaries therefore started to look for new areas to proclaim
the Gospel. After having visited the plain north of Ngaoundéré, mainly inhabited by
the Dii people, the Norwegian mission conference in 1934 decided to expand their
work to this area (Conference Report, NMS Cameroon 1934: 17–25). The Dii were the
least islamised people in the Ngaoundéré region, and according to the missionaries it
was only a question of time before the Muslim elite in Ngaoundéré would emphasise
expansion of Islam, at least to the Dii elite.

Studying the written sources produced by the missionaries, it is striking to what
extent they adapted their version of Christianity to the people they encountered. The
most obvious example of this is their use of agricultural metaphors in their frontstage
publications where they describe their work among the Dii. In the 271 Misjonstidende
articles which contained references to the work in Cameroon in the period under study
(1934–1960), biblical images were used 83 times. A large majority, 47 articles, used
images of farming as metaphors for the work among the local population. The mission-
aries regarded their work as that of the sower, the image of ‘seed/time to sow’ being
found 18 times in the articles. The agricultural metaphors also focus on the hope for
‘fruit and harvest’, another familiar image frequently found in the missionary texts.
The resistance the missionaries met was described as ‘the hard soil’ which the mission-
aries had to labour, but despite this unfertile landscape we often find the metaphor
‘spring’ (and each time connected to the idea of growth) used in the missionary writ-
ings. From this we can already draw the conclusion that the parable of the sower found
in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 13: 4–8; Marc 4: 3–8; Luc 8: 5–8a) played an important role in the self-understanding of the missionary and his/her relation to the mission project in Cameroon. This because the text, the way it was read by the missionaries, challenged to action (to sow) and it explained both the resistance (the unfertile soil) and the success (the harvest) that the missionaries experienced (Drønen 2009: 72–73).

What becomes even more striking is to reflect upon the biblical images that they did not use in their presentation of the Gospel to the Dii. A frequent biblical image used in traditional Norwegian evangelical Protestantism is the metaphor of fishing. Reference to the missionaries as fishermen is only found twice in my sources, and then with reference to fishing with a rod and not with nets. This could of course be due to the difficult terms of the work, and the fact that there was no ‘mass-conversion’ among the Dii people, but it is most probably related to the fact that fishing was no part of Dii everyday practices. Equally surprising is that the image of Jesus as shepherd, and subsequently God as the owner of the domestic animals, is not even mentioned at all in the 271 articles. This is probably a reflection of the fact that the Muslim Fulbe, seen as the main adversary to the missionaries, were cattle-owners and that richness and prestige in the region were measured by the number of cattle in your herd. The fact that God could be seen as a source of blessing and protection through providing and caring for cattle and sheep, was not part of the missionaries’ theological repertoire faced with an ethnic group with a long history of being oppressed by the politically ruling and cattle-owning Fulbe.

Light and Freedom as Metaphors

Apart from the metaphors connected to agriculture we find two other metaphors frequently used in the sources. Conversion to Christianity is first of all regarded as a movement from darkness to light. Secondly conversion is seen as a movement from bondage towards freedom and peace. Why choose these metaphors among the many images found in the Bible, and what did these metaphors mean to the Norwegian missionaries and to the people that they interacted with? The metaphor ‘light’ is a metaphor used many times in the Bible connected to the kingdom of God, and to divine knowledge. It was therefore an obvious image for the missionaries who through their theological tradition in their home country had learned that Africa, spiritually speaking, was ‘the heart of darkness.’ In addition to the obvious theological interpretation, it becomes clear from the sources that the missionaries also regarded their mission as a civilising mission. Enlightenment ideas and positivist philosophy made modernity a human project where everything was possible. To expand this material progress to other parts of the world became ‘the white man’s burden,’ a slogan to some extent shared by both missionaries and colonisers. The strong focus on education among the Norwegian missionaries points to the fact that ability to read the Bible was an important part of the Lutheran project. *Sola Scriptura* did not only mean that everyone should be able to read the Bible, but also that everybody should be able to interpret the Holy Scripture without the intervention of religious specialists. Literacy was of such impor-
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tance to the missionaries that it was made a condition for being baptised. Only few exceptions were given when the persons who sought baptism were too old to learn the magic skills of reading and writing. There were attempts by some missionaries to teach the Gospel according to the oral traditions of the peoples they encountered, but this was soon turned down by the missionary conference (Conference Report, NMS Cameroon, 1952: 8). The missionaries also needed teachers both for their schools and Bible-schools, and therefore literate Christians were important to them. Schools were popular because they meant access for the young Dii to the art of reading and writing, a necessary prerequisite for seeking work with the missionaries or in the colonial administration. The divine knowledge taught by the missionaries consequently became the basis for the modern project of material progress.

What does it mean to be a heathen? It means to really be bound in the strongest bondage that any man can experience – first and foremost bound by the chains of sin and the devil, but many also in brutal slavery by evil men (Norsk Misjonstidende No. 35, 1955: 5).

Freedom was another central term frequently used in the missionary discourse, and the term had a double meaning in the Norwegian sources. First of all freedom was the cure for the spiritual oppression which the Dii, according to the missionaries, suffered from. There are many references to the ‘chains of heathendom’ in terms of sorcery and idolatry in the Norwegian frontstage publication, but little ink is spent on attempts to explain the social significance of the ‘heathen practices’ to the Norwegian audience.

The conference reports and the rich photographic material found in the Mission Archives in Stavanger show that some of the missionaries attempted to describe and understand the local religious practices, but this information was kept backstage. The second meaning of the freedom term was connected to social justice in a particular sense of the word. The economic and political supremacy of the Fulbe was established upon two resources, cattle and slaves, and slave-raiding expeditions were frequent during the 19th century. According to one European traveller’s report from the early 20th century, as many as 10.000 slaves were annually deported from the region to the slave markets in Nigeria (Njeuma 1989: 15). A large number of domestic slaves were also kept by the Fulbe, and even if the terms and conditions of these relationships have been much discussed (Sinderud 1993; 2008), the Dii discourse clearly shows that the Fulbe in their eyes were seen as oppressors. It is natural to link the discourse of freedom to the fact that the Norwegian missionaries in the analysed period quite easily could understand the Dii feelings of being oppressed. Norway was in 1905 ‘freed’ from a five hundred year long political union (with Denmark and Sweden), two World Wars had come and gone, so difficulties caused by some form of external oppression were well known. In a colonial setting in northern Cameroon, where the kirdi (the non-muslim population) experienced political oppression both from the politically superior Fulbe and the French colonial administration, freedom was a theological discourse that was easily adapted. The way the Norwegian missionaries gradually became involved in the political controversy over the Fulbe right to keep servants or slaves in their households against their will gradually also influenced the way the missionaries
expressed themselves theologically. Freedom became an important component in the theological vocabulary due to a feeling of common experience and due to the current political situation of the kirdi population in Adamaua.

I have elsewhere (Drønen 2007) argued that the overall theological approach of the missionary work in Cameroon was defined by a selection of biblical metaphors used by the missionaries in order to explain conversion to Christianity as a process and as a movement. First of all, a process of growth, where the seed (the word) needs time and good conditions in order to bear fruit. Secondly a movement from some kind of spiritual or social bondage towards some kind of liberation, conceptualised by the use of the freedom/bondage and the darkness/light metaphors. The image of God presented by the missionaries to the local population in Adamaua was, as a consequence, the image of a God who was accessible through scriptures only, who did not need any intermediaries, who proclaimed spiritual and political freedom, and who favoured material progress. Christianity was in the missionary discourse not only the message proclaimed by a poor Jew some two thousand years ago. Christianity came to northern Cameroon in a spatial and temporal wrapping where modernity and Norwegian history played important roles.

The Anthropology of God

In order to return to the initial question of this article we have to ask the following question: What does the historical presentation of the two religious traditions tell us about their image of God, and how did they create a platform for the long conversation of conversion? Thomas and Luneau (2004: 127) have called knowledge about God and mystical and ritual approaches towards this supreme being les garants de la certitude, arguing that religion first of all is a way to create meaning and order in the struggle for existence. Inherent in such a claim is the notion that human beings organise their social surroundings as a reflection of their relationship with their deity. Because God responds in a certain way to man’s social actions, society as a whole is organised in a way that avoids chaos and promotes order. The Dii image was closely related to the basic needs of everyday life, to receiving food, to being protected from diseases and to the political organisation of society. The spiritual world was inhabited by a variety of forces which could only be regulated through intermediaries who knew the secrets of the physical places where this protection could be obtained. Clifford Geertz’ (1973) ideas about chaos have inspired Thomas and Luneau, and might explain why the Dii organised their cosmology the way they did.

There are at least three points where chaos – a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but interpretability – threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight (Geertz 1973: 100).

The three points are related, but Geertz puts most emphasis on the analytic capacities of man, and relates it to the analytic puzzle man is faced with, trying to sort out the mystery of existence. He argues that for those who are able to embrace them, «religious
symbols provide a cosmic guarantee … for their ability to comprehend the world» (Geertz 1973: 104). Religion is not only a way to limit the problems and suffering that man encounters, but a way to make the everyday problems supportable and sufferable. Inherent in this analysis is what Geertz calls mood and motivation, the fact that rites and religious practices activate in man a mood related to a perspective of ‘grasping’ an ultimate reality, a particular manner of constructing the world, with other words, faith in something that motivates man’s actions (Geertz 1973: 110). And this motivation is, as we have seen throughout this article, not constructed in a vacuum.

The Norwegian missionaries presented to the Dii an image of a civilised God who demanded certain skills, such as literacy, from his believers. The image of a freedom-loving deity, also in terms of social justice, was shown through selected themes from the Bible which corresponded with the missionaries’ own ideas of order and liberty related to Norwegian recent history. This shows us that man relates to God within particular contexts, in a social environment created by the forces of history, and it also shows that man is moved to action by a complexity of social, cultural, and religious determinates (Beckford 2003: 210). We might still ask with Beckford if there is an «‘anthropological necessity’ for human beings to fend off chaos by socially constructing sacred frames of meaning» (Beckford 2003: 29), the way Berger, Geertz, and Thomas and Luneau seem to argue. My answer would be that in the African context which is described here, the struggle against chaos seems a strong motivation for establishing and maintaining a Dii plausibility structure, but I will support Beckford in his attempt to make social constructivism a theoretical approach which makes sense and is fruitful also without employing Berger’s ‘phenomenology of mental categories’. Beckford’s focus on social environment, history and cultural context seems more appropriate than a fence against chaos when describing the way the Norwegian missionaries portrayed their image of God, and the way this image affected their lives and their theological teachings.

A large group among the Dii converted to Christianity because of its accessibility, because it was a path towards modernity, and because it was a religious alternative which answered the spiritual and material needs of the Dii (Drønen 2009). But what the Norwegian missionaries called conversion was actually a negotiation over the image of God, a negotiation which was formed by the social changes experienced by the Dii people as a consequence of the presence of Islam, French colonial administration, and Norwegian missionaries during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. In this article I have tried to show that the premises for the religious encounter between Dii traditional religion and a Norwegian version of Christianity were two different ‘anthropologies of God’ created through social processes which developed under very different material conditions. It is therefore difficult to accept Mbiti and Idowu’s arguments about the ‘Christian nature’ of the image of God in African Traditional Religion if their arguments are to be read as anything but theological apologetics. There are obvious similarities between the image of God as creator and sustainer of all things in the two religious traditions, but this study has shown that the qualitative content of the two images were so closely linked to the social experiences and the historical surround-
The comparative analysis has, however, provided two important insights. First of all that the Dii religion, contrary to what the Comaroffs have claimed about the Tswana in South Africa, must be regarded as a clearly defined ‘system of beliefs’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 249) and that this recognition of a religious tradition must be taken into consideration when the relationship between missionaries and local beliefs in colonial Africa is discussed. The Comaroffs have through their impressive study drawn our attention towards the uneven material terms of the Tswana-mission encounter, which was the case for most encounters between European missionaries and the local population in Africa. These uneven terms of access to technical resources should, however, not make us blind to the strength of the dogmatic and intellectual capacities of the cultures which the missionaries encountered.

The second insight concerns not only the historical situatedness of the Norwegian missionaries, but also their flexibility in terms of promoting their religious message. I interpret this as evidence of the fact that the missionaries in northern Cameroon, regardless of lack of insight into the local system of beliefs, realised that successful missionary activity always is a negotiation, that conversion is always a social process of transformation where material commodities might be important accessories, but never the complete picture of the new dogmatic outfit.

Concluding Remarks

But for us the idea [of circumcision] came from… we have somehow extracted the idea from the Bible, but without knowing it. As you know, the eight’ day Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the church… you know, like that. But we adopted, we took that, but without knowing, without knowing. Well, that’s why we have circumcised people until today…

My friend the evangelist, who introduced us to the theme of this article, once more shows us how theology and religious practices are formed by our historical consciousness. The context of negotiations which formed the content of what was to become Dii Christianity was not a tabula rasa, it was two separate social, historical, and theological traditions with separate worldviews, separate value systems and separate ideas about the function of religious practices.

The Dii people, prior to the arrival of the Christian missionaries, organised community life around ritual practices which had as its ultimate source the distant god, Tayyi. This deity provided the Dii with blessings, through the harvest from the fields, and protection against evil forces which threatened to disturb the spiritual balance between Tayyi and man. This image of God was challenged by the Norwegian missionaries who presented a different deity. The God of the missionaries was also a fence against chaos, but the terms of protection were new. The mission portrayal of the Christian God was influenced by the social, historical and cultural background of the missionaries, and this made material progress, spiritual and political liberation a new path towards God.
In order to understand how local factors shaped the image of God and the related discourse among both the Dii and the Norwegian missionaries, I have argued that a social constructionist approach can be of considerable value. James Beckford’s focus on social environment, history and cultural context as central analytical terms, can help us describe religious change over time, and it can help us analyse particular religious discourses. The study of Norwegian ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ publications shows that the missionaries to a large extent were influenced by the social environments both in Cameroon and in their home country. A critical anthropology of knowledge might help us draw attention to interesting features of the worldviews of both Norwegian missionaries and the Dii concerning the adaptations that they made in order to adapt to the new social conditions in colonial North-Cameroon.

Notes

1 Archival studies for my initial historical study were conducted in Archives Nationales Section d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France 2005, Archives Nationales de Yaoundé, Cameroon 2006 and in Misjonsarkivet, Stavanger, Norway 2004–2006. This article is mainly based on material found in Stavanger. I would like to thank Nordic Africa Institute and School of Mission and Theology for granting me funds which enabled me to conduct fieldwork and archival studies for the project.

2 I am aware of the differences between Berger and Beckford’s approaches to social constructivism, but when it comes to the descriptive phase of religious practices my understanding is that their views correspond quite well. When it comes to the ‘anthropological necessity’ to fend out chaos, their analytical paths turn in different directions, and this will be discussed towards the end of this article.

3 All translations from French and Norwegian to English by the author. Some of the interviews were conducted in Dii and translated by Djédou Andre and Abdoul Kadiri.

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