# The Axial Age
# and Its Consequences

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# Where Do Axial Commitments Reside?

Problems in Thinking about the African Case

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I am interested in a relatively simple question: Where are Axial commitments located socially, or to put it another way, what does it mean to say that something is an "Axial civilization," especially for latecomers to global modernity in places like Africa, who sometimes receive pieces of the Axial in disconnected chunks? I have been fascinated by Shmuel Eisenstadt's argument in *Japanese Civilization* (1996) that Japan could embrace Axial elements while keeping an archaic core. Despite absorbing many aspects of two great Axial traditions—Buddhist philosophical sophistication and Confucian techniques of governance—Japan remained fundamentally pre-Axial. Japan retained central archaic commitments—the divinity of its imperial system and the unique, particularistic value of "Japaneseness" *(nihonjin)*— despite having assimilated Axial insights into what was understood as fundamentally Japanese. It "contained" Axial cultural elements structurally, incorporating them within robust pre-Axial social forms. For example, according to Eisenstadt, Japanese Buddhist communities, despite their universalistic philosophical orientations, became organized as contained, hierarchical communities, focused on the personal relationship between teacher and disciple, on the model of the Japanese *ie*, or household. So in this case, a "civilization" could remain fundamentally archaic, incorporating many Axial elements while limiting their implications. Conversely (I take this argument from one of Robert Bellah's lectures), when the Hawaiian king Kamehameha III, a descendent of the gods (see Bellah 2011, 197–209), converted to Christianity, Hawaii's archaic religious system collapsed—so one dramatic event at the "center" of an archaic system could transform a civilization.

What, then, does it mean to say that a "civilization" is Axial or pre-Axial? Perhaps with our own commitments to the importance of the political sphere

and our belief that public officials should be held to transcendent ethical norms, we define the essence of the "Axial" as the creation (by a core religious community) of a transcendent realm in terms of which "the ruler" can be judged. But is this really the best or only way to think about where Axial understandings reside?

## Ambiguities of the African Case

I first want to describe the wide varieties of ways in which Africans and African societies are integrated with—or have integrated into themselves— central elements of the great Axial traditions available in the world today. Here I include not only religious traditions but also other elements of "world society" (Frank and Meyer 2007). Indeed, it would be fair to say that on many fronts Africans have embraced modernity with unparalleled enthusiasm.

### Axial Religious Participation

If what it means to be an Axial civilization is that most individuals and communities in Africa have embraced one of the Axial religions, there is no question that Africans have joined the Axial Age. While there is enormous variation in religious belief and practice, Islam and Christianity have attracted large and ever growing numbers of adherents (B. Meyer 2004). In Malawi, where I have worked over the last several years, it is almost unheard of not to be a member of a church or mosque, and many of those we meet are passionately committed to their churches, participating in emotionally vivid, musically intense worship. Especially in the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, one sees a level of religiosity—a fusion of individual hope and striving, attempts to root out threatening demons and cleanse the community and the self, and a determination that faith and discipline will triumph over obstacles—that makes clear that adherence is genuinely integrated into personal and communal life (B. Meyer 1999, 2004; Marshall 2009; Manglos 2010). Indeed, perhaps the most important and to some degree least explored aspects of African Christianity (Islam may operate somewhat differently in this respect) is that, as it did in the Protestant West, it has introduced the model of a fully voluntarist community, chosen by its members, supported by their contributions, and largely independent of clan or village ties.[1]

*World Culture*

African communities are also in ever-widening contact with global realities. Examining the response to AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, one is made vividly aware how broadly universalizing claims about such matters as "human rights," "gender equality," or the right to education (Frye 2012) have become disseminated in Africa.

First, internationally sponsored NGO (nongovernmental organization) and international organizational activity has an enormous presence (Watkins et al. 2012). In Malawi, for example, for most of 2008 and into 2009 UNICEF ran an eye-catching daily banner on the front page of the major newspaper, *The Nation*, proclaiming the right of every child to health and education, and warning against violence against children, sexual abuse, and other ills ("STOP Child Trafficking" with the tagline, "every child has a right to their childhood"; "STOP Sexual Abuse" with "every child has a right to be free from abuse and violence"; "STOP Harmful Cultural Practices" with "every child has a right to good health"; "STOP Early Marriages" with "every girl has a right to complete her education"; "STOP Child Labour" with "every child has a right to go to school"; "STOP Sexual Exploitation" with "every child has the right to be free from sexual exploitation"; "STOP Property Grabbing" with "every orphan has a right to inherit their parents' property"). The same slogans appeared on vivid, cherry-red banners and bumper stickers around the country, strung above town halls, decorating police checkpoints, and on the bumpers of the ubiquitous mini-buses.

At least since the coming of attempts to fight the AIDS epidemic through local community mobilization, and indeed in prior community mobilization for family planning programs, even remote villages often have an entrepreneurial group of young people—perhaps those with Form 4 diplomas (high-school graduates in Malawi's British-style educational system)—who have established a "CBO" (community-based organization). Using globally sanctioned language, they will have written proposals for "training" (which might include "gender sensitization," as well as education in the mysteries of the male and female reproductive tracts, the distinction between HIV and AIDS, and "decision making") and created committees to support those living with AIDS as well as the ever-present (at least in the proposals) "OVCs" (orphans and vulnerable children) and the HBC (home-based care) activi-

ties of the group's volunteer members (Swidler and Watkins 2009). The acronyms here (all of which are widely understood by villagers) suggest the facility with which Malawian villagers have appropriated the necessary arcana of globalized social technologies (see Nguyen 2005b, 2010).

Second, as elsewhere in Africa, Malawians also take seriously the universalizing claims of modern science and medicine. As Émile Durkheim noted in the closing pages of *Elementary Forms*, only participation in something like a universal society can ground confidence in the existence of impersonal scientific laws that are somehow "the same" across time and space. While most Malawians still consult traditional healers, and even the educated accept the ever-present danger of witchcraft, they also have a very straightforward confidence in science and modern medical technology. Indeed, one of the difficulties for Malawians in the early days of the AIDS epidemic was accepting that there could be a disease that was, so to speak, a Western-style affliction but that modern medicine could not cure. Medical anthropologists have studied extensively how Africans distinguish the ailments that Western medicine can cure from those that require traditional healing. Some may go to traditional healers (who are less expensive and usually closer by than the local clinic or hospital) and seek regular medical treatment only if traditional remedies fail. In general, however, they treat most illnesses in straightforward scientific materialist ways, seeking an herbal remedy from a healer or an injection or "tablets" from a clinic with the same pragmatic spirit.

Most Africans we have met also show great interest in the scientific or "materialist" explanations of HIV and AIDS. So, for example, if we mention the recent research showing that male circumcision is strongly protective against HIV transmission, the Form 4 graduates who work with us will say, "Yes, I have been very curious. Why is that? What does circumcision do?" These are exactly the questions public health researchers (and our own students in the United States) ask, and the answer that satisfies them—about the vulnerability of the mucosal underside of the foreskin and its rich supply of the very white cells HIV infects—satisfies the Malawians as well. But even uneducated villagers, whose conversations the Malawi Research Group project has captured in a remarkable set of journals recorded by local diarists,[2] often seek quite straightforward, material explanations of biological phenomena. In a journal from 2003, the journalist overhears a bar girl debating

with three men whether one is more likely to get AIDS from a circumcised or an uncircumcised man: each uses different empirical evidence. The bar girl says to a client:

"If you want to have sex with me I have to know first whether you are circumcised or not because I don't use condoms, in so doing, I do go only with those who are circumcised because they don't have AIDS and those who are not circumcised have got AIDS." Manuel's friend got puzzled with that point and he wanted to learn about what she meant with that point. He said to her, "Why do you think so?" She responded, "It is easier for the uncircumcised men to get AIDS because their fore-skins wrap the fluids after sexual intercourse and this makes them highly risky of catching AIDS, while the circumcised men don't have the foreskins and in so doing, they remain dry at the tips of the genital organs after sexual contact, thus making them not catch AIDS."

Manuel agreed with the bargirl's point, but Malova disagreed with her and he told her that the circumcised ones are the ones who can eas-ily catch AIDS because their genital tips are always displayed, thus giv-ing them a high chance of catching AIDS, while the uncircumcised do sometimes have sexual contact with their foreskins covering the tip of the genital organ that acts as a barrier to permit the infection to enter into their bodies and that makes it less easy for them to get infected with AIDS.

In another diary, men are discussing the many disadvantages of condoms, and a young man offers a quasi-experimental observation:

One boy said that he slept with a woman whom people were saying that she had gonorrhoea, but since he had sex with her, he has no sign of gon-orrhoea meaning that the condom he used at that time protected him. And he also said that his friend Faston Ngalande slept with the very same woman a week after him and after four (4) days, Faston also had gonor-rhoea that is when he started trusting a condom.

Thus empiricism and faith in the universalized discourses of modern medi-cine and science are joined, even if the details remain open to debate.

Third, Malawians, like others across Africa and in poor countries around the globe, participate in world culture through their passionate faith in edu-cation. David Frank and John Meyer (2007) have recently made an extraordi-narily interesting argument about what we might think of as the "Axial" im-plications of the expansion of universities around the world: "The university expands over recent centuries because—as it has from its religious origins—it casts cultural and human materials in universalistic terms" (287).

In parts of Africa I have visited, there is a painful, poignant, almost over-whelmingly powerful thirst for globally legitimated knowledge. This takes the form partly of an obsession with credentials and diplomas. Everyone we meet is longing to better him or herself by completing a two-year degree in accounting, taking a course of study to become a Rural Community Devel-opment Officer, or taking a six-week course to become a VCT (Voluntary Counseling and Testing) counselor. But this longing for official knowledge goes far beyond hopes for material betterment. As one of our Malawian in-terviewers said, when her husband's death ended her hopes of further school-ing, "I was going to be something!" Even those who are not trying for more schooling plead with us for books to make their AIDS knowledge official, and others—like the young woman who comes by foot and mini-bus each time she hears we are nearby—simply want the loan of novels or history books to feed their curiosity. It is not just knowledge, but "official knowl-edge." As Frank and Meyer (2007) note, "the university is positioned to teach both students and society at large the meta-principle that all sorts of particulars can and/or could be understood, and should be understood, as instances of general abstractions" (294). Frank and Meyer further note that the prestige and influence of this officially sanctioned knowledge is directly connected to its claims to transcendent, universalized truth: "The Modern globalized knowledge system increasingly extends into the furthest reaches of daily life, spreading universalized understandings of all aspects of nature and every social institution worldwide" (289).

## Social Organization as Personal Dependence

Despite the enormous appeal of universalized understandings and the powerful appeal of connections to that luminous—if distant—sphere of global society, for most Africans, even those in the modern, cosmopolitan sector,

life is experienced as dependence on personal relationships (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Swidler and Watkins 2007; Chabal 2009).

*Chiefs and Public Goods*

As many others have noted, in contexts from the personal to the political, across Africa (and much of the rest of the world; see, e.g., Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984) most social relationships are organized through personal dependence or patron-client ties (Chabal and Daloz 1999). From pervasive corruption in Nigeria (Smith 2006), to political-party affiliations that turn out to be code words for patronage along lines of kinship, clan, and ethnic group (Weinreb 2001; Chabal 2009), across Africa what might seem like aspects of modern economic and political life are often organized structurally through lineage and kinship. What is more, in societies where personhood is defined in large part through the obligations one performs for superiors and the "redistribution" of wealth one performs for inferiors (Collier 2004), even those without pressing kin obligations constitute their personhood relationally by creating ties of unequal interdependence (Swidler and Watkins 2007).

In interviews with those working in AIDS projects around Africa, I have become convinced that chiefship (or in other places the remnants of precolonial and colonial structures like age sets) remains essential to the organization of public, indeed civic, life (see Swidler 2010).[3] Mahmood Mamdani (1996) is certainly right that colonial authorities perverted the fundamental structure of chiefship. The colonial powers both altered and in some respects reinforced (some might say "invented") the powers of chiefs. The ability of people to abandon a bad chief, and the corresponding expectation that chiefs would "consult" with elders and headmen on important decisions, was weakened as colonial authorities made chiefs into tax collectors and legal authorities, backed by force, with power over "customary land" and "native law." Nonetheless, all over Africa, however often people are disappointed by chiefs who take resources and fail to redistribute them, it is through chiefs and similar authorities that collective life can actually be organized.[4] The resilience of African chiefship (Oomen 2005) is evident in a recent Afrobarometer report from nineteen sub-Saharan African countries: Logan (2011, 1) found "startling . . . intensity" of support for traditional au-

thority, with "large majorities believing that the institution should still play a significant role in local governance." African publics value "the role traditional authorities continue to play in managing and resolving conflict . . . their leadership qualities and their accessibility to ordinary people," as well as their "essential symbolic role as representatives of community identity, unity, continuity and stability." Indeed, I would hazard that where chiefship has been fatally undermined, as in parts of South Africa, collective capacities for communal action have been undermined as well.

Let me offer a few examples as evidence of how chiefs provide the mechanism for creating public goods.[5] The first, most obvious, point is that in villages various public works are organized by chiefs. If the village paths need to be repaired, the village borehole maintained, or a school building constructed, the chief calls a village meeting and asks the villagers to do the work. Thus cooperation is stimulated by and channeled through chiefs. But the chiefs' role is both more important and more varied than that. It is not just that chiefs organize certain cooperative activities. Even more, the vaunted "generalized reciprocity" of African societies is often organized through them.

I interviewed a young woman who ran an AIDS hospice, attached to a Catholic church, outside Lusaka, Zambia. Among other activities, the hospice provided midday meals and eventually schooling for orphans whose parents had died. The hospice director explained that while the hospice arranged for orphaned children to live with relatives in the ten villages and compounds that constituted their catchment area, relatives were willing to take children in only if the chief told them to. Indeed, she explained, they had to involve the chiefs in everything they did, inviting them to be first to join an AIDS committee or to receive "training" in health practices, or the activity would fail.

Another, very different example comes from a funeral I attended in Botswana in 2003. African funerals are large, expensive, and very important events (see Durham and Klaits 2002; Smith 2004).[6] This funeral, far out in the dry, barren Botswana countryside, drew about 200 mourners for a young man in his forties (a schoolmate of my Motswana friend's fiancé), the unmarried son of a single mother. As the mourners stood in the dusty cemetery singing hymns, and three somewhat bedraggled, dusty pastors from different denominations spoke at the graveside, a small, beat-up white van, off to one side, started up and loudspeakers on its roof suddenly came to life,

interrupting the pastors in mid-sentence. My friend whispered that the chief's headman was saying that people were not pressing closely enough around the grave, not providing sufficient comfort to the grieving mother. The ceremony was unceremoniously interrupted twice more when the chief's headman conveyed the chief's wish that people sing the hymns with greater energy and again when he demanded that people stop gossiping and pay full attention to the funeral. Thus it was the chief's responsibility to remind people of their communal obligations and to police, or enforce, those obligations.

In Malawi, the hold of even "bad" chiefs over their people is directly connected to chiefs' authority over funerals (and thus to the all-important relationship to ancestors). When one Malawian acquaintance complained that his chief was corrupt and not respected, we asked why people still were loath to disobey him. Our friend replied, haltingly, as if too appalled to complete the thought, "What if someone in your family died? Or you died . . ." And then he simply trailed off. It was evident that the chief's cooperation—his presence (or that of one of his counselors), his willingness to give a funeral oration, and more important, his permission to bury a family member in the ancestral burial ground, which the chief controls—was essential. Offending the chief, so that one couldn't have a funeral for one's dead, was unthinkable, and essentially unspeakable.[7]

Chiefs make possible the provision of public goods of all sorts. One village woman, a subsistence farmer like her neighbors, but more fortunate since she had occasional work with our project, was asked by her chief to create a youth group in her village, for which she provided weekly refreshments along with advice about AIDS prevention. Thus it was the chief who made sure she redistributed some of her good fortune. The expectation, indeed, is that the chief will be "self-sacrificing." It is he (or occasionally she) who encourages his village to seek out donor-sponsored funding for a CBO, since these have become a major source of cash infusions for villages largely deprived of access to the cash economy. The chief typically asks a public-spirited villager, somewhat better educated than the rest, to prepare a proposal and organize a group of village volunteers. We learned that a chief will also reward those who have shown selfless devotion to collective life: several of our village informants agreed that the chief might come in person, rather than sending one of his counselors, to give a funeral speech for a "worthy" villager—not a wealthy villager, but one who had worked for the welfare of the whole community. Thus the chief in essence keeps the accounts that reward generalized reciprocity. Another of the village-based interviewers who worked for our project told us proudly how he had helped his village get several grants (from World Vision and other donors) for community benefits ranging from blankets for orphans and those living with AIDS, to cloth sufficient for 200 children to have school uniforms, to plastic water jugs for those living with AIDS to fetch water. He insisted that he and the small number of other volunteers who visit the sick and see to their needs, and in his case coordinate the work of the seven CBOs he has helped to found, receive no benefits from all those donor funds, except the occasional per diem when they go for "training." But he also told us that when his mother died, he went to his uncle, the chief of a nearby village, to ask him for some land. His uncle gave him five hectares—a very large "garden" by Malawi standards—and his own T/A (the Traditional Authority, the top of the chiefly hierarchy in Malawi's "traditional" administrative structure) told the uncle that he was very pleased, since the young man had been such a worthy member of his community. So "what goes around comes around" largely via the chiefs.

In the occasional story in which a chief is run out of his village—in the most recent story we heard, the women (in a matrilineal region) gathered around the chief's hut and shouted humiliating insults until he had to leave—his key failing was that he had behaved selfishly, doing things only when they benefited him, and not when they benefited the village as a whole. Those who recounted the scandal said that if the villagers came to this chief because their paths were overgrown and needed clearing, he might "not show up"; he would say the paths were okay. But if he were invited for training at the District Assembly, for which a per diem and travel allowance would be available, he would be "very punctual." This failure of either the capacity or willingness to be public-regarding, and to produce the public goods on which villagers depend, is the essential failing that could mean disrespect for a chief and ultimately lead to his being deposed.

Finally, the chief's spiritual strength is essential to the health of his community. A chief needs to be "confident," and this confidence makes his village strong enough to resist encroachment by other villages on their lands. He also requires spiritual strength to resist witchcraft and the threat it poses to those under his care. In a fundamental way, villagers are dependent on the cooperation and help of those around them, and this cooperation is tied

directly to a person—the person of their chief—in whom spiritual power and personal power are combined.

### Personal Dependence and the Danger of Witchcraft

Although witchcraft has been declared illegal throughout most of Africa (in Malawi, officially witchcraft does not exist and witchcraft accusations are a crime), it is a pervasive fact of contemporary life.[8] The belief in witchcraft—at all levels of society—is linked in turn to Africans' direct dependence on personal relationships. One way to think about this is simply to say that in a world in which everything depends on obligations to and from others, but where those obligations have only spiritual and informal, rather than enforceable, legal sanction, it is no wonder that any misfortune must be seen as due to someone's malevolence, even if that other remains hidden. At the same time, fear of witchcraft is also the sanction on those who have resources but fail to redistribute them. As Mark Auslander (1993) notes for Ngoni communities in Zambia, "reciprocity builds up social relationships and ultimately enables social reproduction, as in bridewealth transactions. By contrast, the witch—as the 'excluded other'—who has been denied gifts, commodities or assistance—is held to reciprocate subversively, by endangering the community . . . he or she may be represented as a marginal being excluded from redistributive networks or as an avaricious, secretly wealthy hoarder"(178).

The role of witchcraft beliefs (and actual witchcraft accusations—a terrible danger[9]) is not confined to isolated villagers. Indeed, the continuing role of witchcraft (its "modernity" in Peter Geschiere's [1997] term)—and the continuing social primacy of ties of personal dependence—can be seen in the ways witchcraft accusations follow acts of political betrayal among top African leaders. When Malawi's recently deceased president, Bingu wa Mutharika, was first elected in 2004, he almost immediately declared his independence from the former president, Bakili Muluzi, founding his own breakaway political party. Mutharika (usually called simply "Bingu") faced a scandal in the newspapers because he refused to move into the presidential mansion. The newspapers claimed that he feared the house had been bewitched; Bingu vigorously denied the accusations, while offering a variety of other reasons for refusing to move into the house. The subtext to the scan-

dal, however, was that the former president's people had suggested that Bingu lacked the spiritual strength—as a traitor to his former patron, spiritually in the wrong—to ward off the threat of witchcraft from Muluzi. Bingu's furious denials were not so much denials of backward superstitions and assertions of his modernity or rationality, as declarations that he was more than fortified against any magic Muluzi could muster. In Nigeria (Smith 2006), a similar witchcraft-laden battle erupted when another political leader betrayed his former patron—with open letters published between the two, accusing each other not of corruption, but the former patron accusing the former client of refusing to use government resources to repay the patron who had placed him in power. Witchcraft accusations and terrible panics about children stolen and murdered for witches' rites also erupt where glaring inequalities between rich and poor demand redress (see Smith 2006). How else could the grotesquely wealthy acquire their wealth than by secretly stealing the blood of other people's children? Hence witchcraft accusation can provide a form of political critique, and witchcraft itself can be a sanction against misuse of resources.

### Axial Religion and the Social Location of Dependence

Robin Horton, in his classic essay "African Conversion" (1971), developed a brilliant argument to account for the appeal of Axial religions in Africa. Horton argued that both conversion to the world religions, Christianity or Islam, and "internal conversion," in which indigenous African religious systems evolved to emphasize the centrality of a "supreme being," reflected the same social transformation. Africans reworked their faith as they increasingly came into contact with powerful, cosmopolitan forces, so that their fates were determined by forces beyond the local, interpersonal world of the village. As Horton and J. D. Y. Peel (1976) describe it, "economic and political changes . . . weakened the boundaries which had previously kept the local community more or less insulated from the wider world. They were therefore just the sort of changes which . . . result in a high level of Christian affiliation" (492). The appeal of the Axial religions is that they offer powerful rituals for gaining access to the forces that now control life: "a person who has found himself thrown into the wider world beyond the bounds of his local community, and who has therefore sought to come to terms directly

with the forces underpinning this wider world," engages in a "quest for a more elaborate concept and cult of the Supreme Being" (496).

Horton is certainly right about the individuating and universalizing elements of contemporary African experience that make Axial religions intellectually plausible and experientially resonant. Indeed, he provides a persuasive interpretation of another aspect of African religion—and African attitudes more generally—when he argues that churches like the Aladura churches Peel studied in Nigeria also offer direct linkages to the wider world. As he and Peel (1976) observe:

> whatever the local peculiarities of their origins, [these congregations] are always anxious to see themselves, not as closed, self-contained communities, but as local cells of large, even world-wide organizations, as small parts of the immense body of world Christendom. This is something very obvious to the visiting historian or anthropologist. When he attends a sacrifice to the ancestors in, say, an Ibo village, he is very much aware of being there as an outsider, for they are not *his* ancestors. When, however, he visits an Aladura congregation, he is invited to participate in its religious life as a brother Christian. In this capacity, moreover, he is quite likely to be asked for advice, particularly on the matter of contact with other Christian groups in the world outside. (496, italics in the original)

This is true of African churches I have visited, but also more generally of the Africans who are eager for a business card, for an address, or even a postcard that conveys some image of the wider world the visitor represents.

Horton and Peel (1976) have thoroughly refuted the charge of "intellectualism" leveled at their interpretation of African conversion.[10] Nonetheless, I think there is a fundamental weakness in their model, and thus in the basic interpretation of Africans' embrace of Axial religions as creating an Axial civilization. In a passage I agree with profoundly they say, "Our position is that cosmology, and its related cultic practice, arises as a response to experience. We do maintain that religions must be regarded first and foremost as systems of thought; but experience, not thought, is the object of thought and hence of religion. And as sociologists we are concerned with thought as a response to social experience" (485). But what they miss, at least to some degree, is the "social" in the constitution of social experience.

In Bellah's (1964) original model of religious evolution, the intellectual or cosmological breakthroughs of the historic (Axial) religions were accompanied by profound changes in social and religious organization: toward at least partially autonomous religious organizations, toward a differentiation of worldly and religious authority, and toward new modes of integration of individual personhood (and thus of personal moralities) into collective life. Horton and Peel's model, while it is not "intellectualist," is still at some fundamental level individualist. It focuses on how changes in social and economic organization—in the "scale" of the factors that impinge on people's lives—affect individual experience. What is left out of this way of formulating the issue is the question of how religious ideas and experiences contribute to relocating the sacred, and thus to reformulating the fundamental social codes that *constitute* collective entities. It is at this level, I would argue, that the African case raises fundamental questions about where Axial commitments reside.

## Axial Experience without Axial Civilization

In a way that resembles Eisenstadt's (1996) analysis of Japanese civilization, I argue that much of Africans' access to the universalizing elements of global discourses has been incorporated without fundamentally changing their patterns of collective life. Like the Japanese, African social patterns and the cultural codes that govern them have proved extraordinarily resilient. Patrick Chabal (2009), the great authority on Africa, describes the pattern this way:

> One is a person, one belongs, one is part of a community, *in so far* as one is integrated in a complex system of authority, deference and participation, which forms the backbone of the intersecting spheres of identity that matter for life in that given society. The idea that an individual could live utterly detached from any community is not one that finds favour, or is even meaningful in Africa—as is made clear by the pejorative reputation such individuals inevitably acquire. Therefore, the question is not whether to be party to a system of obligations or not but how to manage one's place within such a system. To have no obligations is not to belong; it is not to be fully and socially human. Obligations,

therefore, are not seen—as the Western concept seems to imply—as impositions, claims on one's otherwise better used time and energy, but as a means of sustaining one's place in a network of belonging: that most vital attribute of humanity, sociability and, ultimately, being-in-the-world. (48, italics in the original)

Thus the universalizing elements of NGO discourses are appropriated within an understanding that converts them, both organizationally and cognitively, into ingredients for the formation of patron-client ties. Daniel Jordan Smith (2003), an anthropologist who studies Nigeria, has a wonderful analysis of the "workshop mentality" in family planning programs. Family planning workshops advocate lowered fertility and thus a decreased reliance on accumulating "wealth in people." In practice, however, the workshops allow Nigerians to accumulate precisely the wealth in people that is understood to constitute both personhood and sociality. Those who organize a workshop distribute patronage and accumulate "wealth in people" by choosing who will participate and thus gain access to valuable per diems and travel allowances; participants can use the workshop to reward their own patrons by inviting them as trainers or honored guests.

In an analogous way, as Harri Englund (2003) has argued, Malawian Pentecostal churches frequently split over the distribution of "goods," both spiritual and material, to which their pastors have access by virtue of their connection to foreign church sponsorship, and by virtue of their access to transcendent spiritual powers. Like chiefs, pastors are expected to redistribute spiritual powers and material goods; accusations that a pastor has monopolized those goods can precipitate a church schism. Much as the Japanese assimilated Axial civilizational elements to the cultural framework of the household, many Africans assimilate elements of "universalistic" global modernity within the flexible and robust cultural structure of lineage and chieftaincy, with its hierarchy of sacredness, ties of personal dependence, and redistributive obligations of superiors. Thus the elements of universalizing modernity, such as the discourse of "empowerment" or human rights, are appropriated through and reworked to produce patron-client ties, in which spiritual power and the responsibility for reproducing collective life flow upward in a lineage-like hierarchy (even if such a hierarchy is reinvented by urbanites seeking to define themselves as a community and a po-

litical constituency [see Barnes 1986]). This is not simply a matter of political patronage and the persistent routing of political benefits through ethnic loyalties. It goes deeper, to the basic codes through which people can constitute and reconstitute social relationships.

Africans do manifest one fundamental element of the Axial—an enormous longing, a reaching out to grasp "the universal," the global symbols of a higher, transcendent reality (a longing that would be quite unfamiliar, I think, to the Japanese). This "transcendent" reality's presence also, however, suggests the fundamental problem about conceptualizing the social "location" of axialness.

In contrast to Horton's perspective, in my view the worship of a "transcendent being," or in Bellah's (1964) terms a "dualistic" cosmology, is not just a way of mediating individuals' understanding of the world and their need for access to the forces that control it. The creation of Axial civilizations also involved fundamental reorganization of the sacred—in Clifford Geertz's (1968) terms, a new understanding of "the mode in which the divine reaches into the world" (44). Understandings of the sacred are not primarily "about" individual experience, even individual experience of social relationships. Rather, the sacred, as Bellah (1973) suggests in his classic essay on Durkheim's *Elementary Forms,* constitutes and makes accessible (if only as an ineffable possibility) the fundamental organization of collective life. And thus Axial cultural elements acquire their meaning in part from the collective capacities they make possible.[11]

Religious or other ultimate meanings, while they may provide answers to fundamental questions about causality and may promise individuals the possibility of influencing the important powers that impinge on their lives, more importantly provide the basic codes, and encode basic reservoirs of sacredness, that allow the constitution and reconstitution of patterns of collective life. These are the codes through which human communities create, interpret, and regulate authority, preeminence (status), cooperation, and reciprocity—the fundamental processes of social life. Such codes—basic conceptions of obligation or morality but also the imagined shape of the institutional arrangements that create capacities to act as a group—are normally transposed from one familiar realm to another, as when political authority is understood on the model of the relationship between parent and child, or when the relationship between lord and serf provides the template for the

practices through which factory labor is organized (Biernacki 1995). Axial elements at the level of individual experience can thus be incorporated within fundamentally pre-Axial forms of social organization.

Africa and Africans have been eager recipients of the increasingly universalized ideologies and forms of social organization being imported wholesale into contemporary societies that are too poor or too unsure of themselves to resist "missionary" intrusions. It is less clear whether, at least in most parts of Africa, there have been new constitutive moments, dramatic collective "events" in William Sewell's (1996) sense, that have been able to reconstitute forms of collective life to match the Axial aspirations of Africa's increasingly universalized global citizens. Indeed, in many ways it is as if Africans were being assimilated directly, at least in their imaginations, into the global institutions of the international community, its international NGOs, churches, courts, and transnational advocacy organizations, bypassing the Axial reconstruction of national or society-wide institutions.[12]

In trying to determine where the Axial is located, I am arguing, we need to look not only at the great traditions that shape individual aspirations and experience, but also at the fundamental "constitutive rules" that define the social location of the sacred power of collective life. Thus we should look not only for the penetration and resonance of Axial traditions but for changes in the rules that constitute forms of individual personhood and collective life. Here the churches, especially the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, have supported both new forms of community and newly individualized forms of self-discipline, aspiration, and striving. The churches have introduced new, voluntarist forms of group cohesion and obligation at the level of the congregation. But in the wider society, and to some degree penetrating religious congregations as well, the effective forms of obligation and the symbolic resources that underlie them are still modeled on the hierarchical, personalistic ties of lineage, clan, and chieftaincy. Most importantly, capacities for collective action have not really been reconstructed at the societal level. Rulers are not directly held accountable to universalized, transcendent moralities, and capacities for collective action are still very much dependent on the powers of chiefs and other traditional figures to anchor the public-regarding morality that creates collective goods. Whether the attempts of transnational bodies, like the International Criminal Court in the Hague, or the broader attempts to bring war criminals and others to justice under

the banner of human rights (Sikkink 2009) can constitute a meaningful form of Axial transcendence for a new global society remains to be seen.

Locating the Axial, finally, raises the question of where authoritative notions of reality are anchored. This question is unresolved in the United States and the rest of the so-called Modern West, as illustrated by the debates between fundamentalists insistent on asserting the literal, scientific reality of biblical truths, and by the many who remain skeptical of the authority of modern science (Whitehead 1974). In contemporary African societies one sees a genuine syncretism with respect to the sources of authoritative understandings of reality, if we mean by this that multiple notions of what is really real can coexist: the one God who created the world, controls its processes, and redeems his children; the universalistic rights of all human beings, anchored in the global claims of World Culture and in the specific slogans and practices of NGOs and other emissaries of the global; and witchcraft and the sacred powers of chiefs and others who anchor the ties of personal dependence on which personhood and collective possibility depend.

In Africa, people increasingly have access to the global, the universalized, the cosmopolitan (blue jeans and the iPod) in just the ways Horton has argued. But there has not been a reconstitution of "society." Rather, there are patches of the Axial in societies where the sacred is fundamentally constituted in archaic ways, even if that archaic pattern can absorb the new patrons who come from abroad, suggesting new projects, altering individuals' fates, requiring propitiation, but without connection to a fundamental social ethics or a realistically accessible set of institutional possibilities.

My final point applies not only to Africa but to societies around the globe. If the social-structural bases of modernity take root—a labor market that grounds the experiential understanding that one is dependent primarily on one's own abilities and efforts rather than on others, and a modern state that anchors and enforces universalized claims to citizenship and individual rights (Soysal 1994; Collier 1997)—we will certainly have a globalized Axial ideology of individual experience, reinforcing and justifying the lived reality of individuals around the world. But without transformation of the basic meanings that govern collective action, and without either the transformation or re-creation of the deepest layers of sacred symbols that constitute new collective capacities, I cannot see how we can have a globalized Axial civilization.

To constitute a globalized Axial civilization, such a culture would have to create symbolic leverage for judging the morality of human conduct and holding rulers accountable; define a transcendent sphere of potential liberation or salvation toward which individuals and communities could strive; construct a narrative of the "radical evil" from which human beings seek to be redeemed; and create the moral basis for a wider community, increasing the capacity of human beings to organize and act in an increasingly interdependent world.

## Notes

1. The creation of a fully voluntarist model of community was, of course, a relatively late development within Protestantism, most fully realized in the Anglo-American tradition where multiple sects competed in the absence of, or in opposition to, a state church. It is perhaps this voluntarist model of how communities can be formed and re-formed that is one of Protestantism's most significant cultural and structural legacies (E. P. Thompson 1963; Walzer 1978; Bellah et al. 1985; Gorski 2005; Fischer 2010; Jepperson and Meyer 2011).

2. A fuller description of the journals can be found in Watkins and Swidler (2009). Papers using material from these diaries suggest their remarkable richness (see, e.g., Kaler 2003, 2004; Swidler and Watkins 2007; Tavory and Swidler 2009). A sampling of the anonymized journals is available at: www.malawi.pop.upenn .edu/Level%203/Malawi/level3_malawi_qualjournals.htm.

3. See Karlström (1996, 1999) and Schaffer (1998) on the fusion of clan and chiefdom with concepts of democracy and civility in Buganda and Senegal, respectively. Both authors report, for example, that civic equality is understood as equal or fair treatment from a superior or chief, who listens to everyone fairly. Karlström (1996, 489) writes: "The concepts of justice *(obwenkanya)* and impartiality *(obutasosola)* were used by informants in explaining both the importance of free speech and their sense of justice. *Obwenkanya* is an abstract noun derived from the verb *kwenkana,* 'to be equal/similar,' and can be loosely translated as 'fairness' or 'equality.' The equation of democracy with *obwenkanya* may seem to indicate something akin to Western egalitarianism. What is im-

plied here, however, is narrower: a situational equality of subjects before a power-holder and decision-maker rather than an ontological equality of persons. Hence the centrality of the implied audience of decision-makers in statements like the following: 'I understand "democracy" to mean *obwenkanya,* like when you give an opinion and it is not ignored but *is also considered and a decision is made taking it into account* (cited by Tidemand, 1995: 127; emphasis added).'"

4. A remarkable work of social history, Landeg White's *Magomero* (1987), shows that Africans were in no way bound by unchanging tradition. Rather, they responded actively and inventively to both threats and opportunities, migrating to new lands, reinventing their genealogies, and sometimes reinventing their family structures and tribal identities as necessity or opportunity dictated. Even in periods of massive disruption, however, chiefdom provided a flexible schema through which people could reestablish community, make claims on others, and recreate capacities for collective action.

5. This line of argument draws on recent work focusing on governance as a crucial aspect of development in poor communities. The study of governance is being embraced by economists, who still think in terms of "transparency" and how to create conditions that maximize things like the flow of information so that well-informed constituents can use their votes effectively. The interesting results, however, are those like Cornell and Kalt's (2000) work on "cultural match" as a predictor of good governance in American Indian tribes and Lily Tsai's (2007) remarkable work on how in contemporary China "accountability" and the provision of local public goods depend on local government officials' participation in traditional cultural groups, such as those that maintain ancestors' graves or perform traditional Chinese dance.

6. *The Daily Times* (Friday, June 27, 2008, p. 1) reported a Malawi government study which found that Malawians spend between 200,000 and 3 million Malawi Kwacha on a funeral—a "fortune" equivalent to $1,400 to $20,000 in a country with GDP per capita of about $300 per year.

7. We have been told that in rare cases failing to "respect" the chief can lead to being "chased" from the village, losing one's land as well as one's community. Denying someone the right to bury a family member would be one form of "chasing" the person away. On the other hand, in addition to reports of chiefs being deposed, in the diaries there is a case of a chief asking people in his village to repair a village road, and the villagers answering that the chief should tell his relatives to repair the road, since they are the only ones who benefit when the chief has something to distribute. Several people also told us that when there is a dispute in a village, or when the person who inherits the chief's position is incompetent or "dull," a section of the village can move a short distance away, retaining their lands but constituting themselves as a new village with a new headman. Such splits are the major way new villages form, either when there is dissatisfaction

or when villages get too large—or, as we learned recently, when new government salaries for chiefs make the multiplication of chiefs (and thus villages) attractive.

8. See Smith (2006) on witchcraft accusations in contemporary Nigeria, Ashforth (1998, 2000, 2005) on South Africa, Abrahams (1994) on contemporary Tanzania, and Englund (1996) on Malawi.

9. See Miguel (2005) on witch killings in contemporary Tanzania.

10. Horton and Peel note that "Horton's approach to religious change in Africa is founded on two premises. First, that where people confront new and puzzling situations, they tend to adapt to them as far as possible in terms of their existing ideas and attitudes, even though they may have to stretch and develop them considerably in the process. Second, that where people assimilate new ideas, they do so because these ideas make sense to them in terms of the notions they already hold" (1976, 482).

11. Bellah (1970) has made the point that sacred symbols make such collective capacities graspable by connecting unconscious emotional energies to collectively accessible symbols.

12. The literature on global and transnational institutions is now vast, but there is little analysis of where their fundamental cultural claims could be worked out institutionally. Vinh-Kim Nguyen (2005a) has articulated the notion of "therapeutic citizenship," in which Africans living with AIDS become direct clients of transnational organizations, and perhaps "citizens" of some global community. John Meyer and his collaborators (J. Meyer et al. 1997; Boli and Thomas 1997) have the boldest description of the creation of a "world polity," but they dismiss the question of the gap between the cultural imaginary that system creates and its institutional embodiments with the simple notion of "decoupling." Many others have written of the varied aspects of an emergent, actual, or failed project of global governance (see, e.g., Keck and Sikkink 1998; Callaghy et al. 2001; Slaughter 2004), but with few exceptions they deal only obliquely with the gaps between the cultural and institutional aspects of a putative "global society" (though see Heydemann and Hammack 2009; Swidler and Watkins 2009; and the quite varied work of critical anthropologists of development, e.g., Mosse and Lewis 2005; Adams and Pigg 2005; Ong and Collier 2005; Ferguson 2006).

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