

Introduction

The books under review raise interesting issues germane to contemporary debates about tradition, modernity and ways of knowing. The questions thus raised include: do categories of tradition and modernity exist in the day-to-day lives of people? If so, how can tradition be distinguished from modernity? Do people draw distinctions about what is traditional and what is modern in their day-to-day lives? To what extent do people think and live in binaries? To what extent are people shaped by education, the physical environment, age, race, gender and experience? How do people draw daily on their traditions and modernities to live their lives and interact with others? And with what outcomes? The three books by Francis Nyamnjoh offer, through the issues they articulate and the characters they develop, intriguing insights into these questions on the complex entanglements of ways of knowing inspired by the interplay between traditions and modernities in an African setting. Francis Nyamnjoh shows that knowledge is not by any means a neutral realm.

Ways of Knowing

In *Souls Forgotten*, the scientists and journalists who went to Abehema to research on the Abehema disaster engaged in contests (advancing their own explanations) with the knowledge or what is called 'belief' about the disaster by the local Abehema people who believed the disaster to be a supernatural punishment. What is interesting is that the diviner-healers in Abehema were able to foretell the disaster and the scientists and journalists came to Abehema to explain the disaster *ex post facto*. The scientists could not agree among themselves about the causes of the disaster and their explanations were said to go nowhere beyond speculation because they were partial. What is striking in the books is the fact that, on the one hand, to get knowledge about the disaster and about love, sex and power in Mimboland, the foreign scientists, the journalists and Lilly Loveless all had to fly to Mimbo; on the other hand, to get knowledge about the land of the dead and about the disaster in Abehema, one might say, the diviner healers had to fly to the land of the dead (which is where one diviner-healer met with the dead chief of Abehema as narrated in *Souls Forgotten*).

Whereas some people needed aeroplanes to fly, the healers did not need any technology (at least in the so-called modern sense) to do so. Whereas Lilly Loveless and the scientists who visited Abehema after the disaster could interact or network with other human beings and 'nature', the diviner-healers interacted with both humans and the spirits as well as with so-called 'nature'. If the amount of knowledge and power one has depends on the number of networks one is able to mobilize, one would consider expanding networks rather than truncating them. To network with others, academics at the University of Mimboland had to drive or fly to attend conferences; likewise, to network with the spirits, the diviner-healers had to fly to the land of the dead. Similarly, networks with other humans could be induced through dreams. In Nyamnjoh's works, dreams are viewed and experienced as communicating reality, oftentimes forewarning disasters as in the Abehema disaster.

The difference between, on the one hand, communicating through dreams, through diviner-healers who flew to the land of the dead in Abehema and, on the other, relying on scientists, journalists and Lilly Loveless, all of whom flew to Mimboland after the Abehema disaster; and in the case of Lilly Loveless, to research on

Tradition, Modernity and Ways of Knowing

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The Disillusioned African (1995/2007, ISBN: 978-9956-558-02-5)

Souls Forgotten (2008, ISBN: 978-9956558124)

Married But Available (2009, ISBN: 978-9956558278)

by Francis Nyamnjoh

all books published by Langaa RPCIG, Bamenda, Cameroon

love, sex and power in Mimboland, is that where networks through dreams and through diviner-healers were used, the networks were not visible to the eye of ordinary humans; but where scientists and journalists and Lilly Loveless flew to Mimboland, they were seen flying. Lilly Loveless was seen off by her mother at the airport; when she returned to Muzunguland after her fieldwork, she was met by her boyfriend. In other words, the plane in which she flew had other humans who could witness her flight but the flights by diviner-healers had no human witnesses and no one saw them take off or land. What was apparent was the knowledge which they brought from the spiritual world which accurately foretold the Abehema disaster. The knowledge about the Abehema disaster that was based on divinations was considered by the scientists and by the journalists to be superstitious and incorrect, supposedly because the scientists could not verify the claims by the diviner-healers and because the connections between spirits and the Abehema lake disaster were not empirical and visible to the scientists and to the journalists. In other words, the causal connections could not be identified by the scientist.

Francis Nyamnjoh's work prods one to ask why modernity and *a fortiori* science does not dismiss other invisible networks or things such as love and power which Lilly Loveless was studying. Why is it that modern science does not dismiss invisible connections between people through cyberspace or connections through the internet, cell phones, and electronic media, which are considered as technology in modern societies? Arguably, what is visible are the gadgets and not the connection itself. If, as in Abehema, invisible spirits (see also Krog et al 2009) are thought to populate the land and to network with humans or to network humans, what premises can be relied upon to refute the claim (if one was to make it) that both the modern and the traditional rely on invisible spirits to effect communication? What then will be the reason for calling one form of communication irrational, illogical or superstitious and the other scientific if both the moderns and the traditional rely on invisible spirits (whatever different names they may be given: spirits, electrons, electro-magnetic forces or waves) to communicate and to conduct their business? Are the labels not merely indications of battles for hegemony rather than of difference? Is science itself not a belief system that at times mobilizes the invisible in the same way as diviner-healers and witches mobilize invisible forces?

Consider, for example, what is called cyberspace and free market forces in modern parlance in the light of Francis Nyamnjoh's books, in which invisible spirits are considered to populate the land. Are the cyberspaces not populated by invisible beings as well? In other words, are the cyberspaces empty spaces and are the free market forces not spiritual forces to which

neo-liberalism chooses to cede the operations of the market? The books beckon one to rethink the tenability of the binaries of tradition and modernity, of nature and culture, belief and knowledge in the sense (as Bruno Latour 1993 argues) that the binaries are figments of the imaginations of the Enlightenment science, which was preoccupied with what it termed rationality, logic, objectivity, empiricism. In the process, the scientists arrogated to themselves the roles of judges over other humans, cultures and nature.

The debates about modernity and tradition have been raging since the Enlightenment in Europe, with conservative thinkers pointing out the necessity of what were called traditional ways of life, including the community and its values of communitarianism rather than individualism; they argued for the divine right of kings to rule. On the other hand, advocates of the Enlightenment made a case for what has come to be called progress, associated with modernity, rationality, logic, empiricism, freedom, including freedom from the tyranny of monarchical authority, human rights, including equality and liberty. Thus, tradition was associated with conservatism – with the unwillingness to change, stagnation, superstition, irrationality and authoritarianism – while modernity was associated with change, secularization, freedom/liberty, rationality and progress. Both notions of tradition and modernity were abstractions and generalizations about the past and the future, respectively. But the precision of these terms has come to be questioned (see Bruno Latour 2007). Drawing on Bruno Latour's argument that even Europeans have never been modern although they thought they were modern, one can argue that the Enlightenment thinkers overstated their abilities to divorce themselves from their own traditions and the conservative thinkers overstated their fears of change because some monarchies still exist in Europe. When Charles in *The Disillusioned African* visited the Queendom (England), he discovered that the English rely on palmistry, horoscopes and taboos about passing under ladders as much as they relied on biomedical health systems.

According to Pippa Norris et al. (2004), the seminal thinkers of the 19th century, including Karl Marx, Max Weber, Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, thought that religion would wear away with modernity and the attendant industrialization. Weber for instance thought that the rationalization that accompanied bureaucratization of modern institutions would make it unnecessary to rely on the metaphysical and the spiritual. Pippa Norris et al and Ronald Inglehart et al (2000) argue that while there have been some degree of structural differentiation, rationalization and bureaucratization, democracy and secularization of institutions, there has been the emergence of a new form of spirituality and the resurgence of some religions in the ex-communist societies. According to

Pippa Norris et al, it is necessary to look at variations between the sacred and the secular across space, levels of industrialization and social class. They further opine that the existential security dimension holds that religion fades out when people think that survival is secure and can be taken for granted. Otherwise, poverty, insecurity and inequality explain the continued religiosity of some people. Their argument is that where there are better hospitals, trained health care officials, access to basic drugs and medicines, immunization and schooling, religion may fade but these conditions are not in themselves sufficient.

Ronald Inglehart et al (2000) concur with Pippa Norris et al in that they also claim that the higher the level of industrial development and welfare state, the more likely that religion and spirituality are forgotten because people take survival for granted. The underlying assumption in Pippa Norris et al and Ronald Inglehart et al is that rich people, people in areas of high industrialization and people with access to good hospitals with drugs and trained officials will not rely on religion and spirituality.

The Vice Chancellor and the Registrar of the University of Mimboland performed ritual sacrifices in spite of their high levels of education and despite the fact that they were relatively secure financially by Mimboland standards. In *The Disillusioned African*, Charles lamented the reliance on magic by African leaders who used it to retain their grip over power. The African presidents whom Charles was worried about were not poor or uneducated even by European standards; for instance, they tended to be more erudite about Europe than about Africa and they had investments in European countries. Some of them reportedly spoke European languages better than some Europeans. Other African leaders could afford to fly to Europe frequently and they established, in Africa, 'Eton High Schools'. In spite of all this mimesis of Europe, the African leaders relied on magic to ensure their longevity in power. They used the magic as well as the repressive state apparatus, including the police, the army and the gendarmes to suppress the citizens. Charles, who had been to England, noted how much the English relied on astrology, palmists and horoscopes and taboos about passing under ladders or not; yet, in the same England he noted the multiplicity of hospitals with many trained officials.

The thesis of Pippa Norris et al and Ronald Inglehart et al about the relationship of secularization to existential security issues is equally problematic in that it assumes that there is a stage in human life when people feel secure enough to take survival for granted. The reliance on magic and rituals by the African leaders, university officials and high ranking government officials in Francis Nyamnjoh indicates that even those with power, modern education and wealth do not take survival for granted for they have to worry, among other things, about the security of their positions and how to stay long in those positions.

The risks of modernity are theorized by Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992). For Giddens, in modernity, there are risks of nuclear weapons, very destructive wars and destruction to the environment. Modernity also sequesters the individual from kinship relations. Beck asserts that there are risks of relying on aliens for survival in modern societies. Modernity, he further argues, grants freedom to individuals to choose their partners or whether or not to have children, but in the process of making the choices the individuals run risks of disappointment

with their choices. The risks of modernity, Giddens and Beck argued, can be tamed by what they called reflexivity, that is constant revision of the self and knowledge. The thesis by Giddens and Beck is useful in that it enables one to see the whole project of modernity as creating risks and perhaps offering some security at the same time. For Giddens and Beck, in modernity, we do not only experience some existential security in the way described above but we also experience risks. Security is not a function of welfare and access to social and economic assets, but of broader concerns about nuclear armaments, wars or threats thereof which affect everyone, rich or poor. Giddens' and Beck's thesis about the risks of modernity are relevant to Francis Nyamnjoh but the thesis also fails to explain some aspects of his books.

In *Souls Forgotten*, Emmanuel's father had to perform rituals for him when he was about to leave for his university studies so that his ancestors and God would protect and guide him in his studies. He was leaving the village of his kin for the town. Indeed, Emmanuel faced risks of failing in the university and of being thrown out as a result. His journey to the town for his university studies posed the risk of him being sequestered from his kinship networks by virtue of the geographical separation from his kin. Indeed, Emmanuel stayed in the streets after he failed and was thrown out of the University because he did not have anyone to turn to when he had no income or job, until he was assisted by Patience, whom he met at an evening church service.

In *The Disillusioned African*, when Charles was in England, he was frustrated by the philosophy of 'everyone for themselves and God for us all'. The fact that even his university in England had to close down his department because it faced financial distress indicates that there cannot be existential security even in the developed societies. The professor who supervised Charles had to go and start studying in a new university when his department was closed down. In *Married But Available*, men and women were sequestered from their social relations with their partners, their children and other kin; marriages and other love relationships were insecure as evidenced in the multitude of extramarital and premarital affairs in urban Mimboland, fuelled no doubt by the love for modern assets and by the anonymity of the urban milieu where conferences were conducted (and rendezvous made) and by watching pornography on the internet. These issues indicate the validity of Giddens' and Beck's thesis about modernity being risky.

However their arguments are problematic, such as Giddens' proposition that modernity is a post-traditional society, that there are stages such as high/reflexive modernity. On the other hand, Beck's arguments that there are traditional societies, industrial societies and reflexive modernity are also problematic because implicit in Giddens and Beck's thesis is the idea that societies change in linear fashion; yet, as argued below, changes in societies are far from neat and linear. In Francis Nyamnjoh's *Souls Forgotten*, the diviner healer had power to fly to the land of the dead to find out the cause of the death of the Fulani chief Ardo Burba and, in the same way, albeit using a different mode, Lilly Loveless in *Married But Available* as well as journalists and scientists in *Souls Forgotten* flew to Mimboland to do research and find out what had happened after the Abehema disaster. To communicate with spirits and humans, people in Abehema used ritual sacrifices; but, in *Married But Available*, people also communicated using the internet – emails and pornography, cell phones, newspapers, radios and music.

Giddens' argument that globalization involves time and distance compression fails to appreciate, as is arguably portrayed in Nyamnjoh's books, that since diviner-healers in Abehema could instantaneously travel to the world of spirits and communicate with them, time and distance have always been compressed even in what are called traditional societies. From a reading of Francis Nyamnjoh's *Souls Forgotten*, one is inclined to think that, while modernity compresses distance between humans, it in some way also increases distance between some humans and spirit beings. Take, for example, secular responses by the local authorities, in the form of using the police and gendarmes to physically cordon off the areas that were affected by the Abehema disaster: one wonders whether the local authorities (using the same logic of the Abehema notables) could have thought about propitiating the spirits through rituals or conducting protective rituals for those who were still unaffected by the gaseous emissions.

Insights on how to respond to disasters of the nature of Abehema are drawn from Bruno Latour's (2004) paper on cosmopolitics, wherein he argued that the nature-culture divide needs to be bridged in the analysis of conflicts. Peace proposals do not have to include only humans, but their relations with nature, involving objects, gods, and animals which are part of the wider cosmos, beg for attention as well. In this vein, it can be argued that disasters such as the Abehema one would have required a broader assemblage of humans and nonhumans to resolve: secular and anthropocentric solutions to the disasters would in a sense produce partial remedies.

In Francis Nyamnjoh, President Longstay does not only mobilize the support of the electorate for his 'Longstay' in power, but he also mobilizes the support of spirits through magic. A Mimbolander in *Souls Forgotten* who was irked by the policeman's demands for a bribe had to mobilize the magical powers to punish the police officer by making the money with which he had bribed him turn into a hen while in his pocket. In *Married But Available*, some people who desired money in Mimboland relied on weird rituals prescribed by marabouts, including having sex with snakes. What is evident in the texts is that the people in Mimboland did not only mobilize the human capacities, but the nonhumans as well, in their day-to-day lives. What is evident in the books by Nyamnjoh is that in Mimboland, magic and beliefs have not disappeared or faded but they are simply kept out of public gaze while continuing to be used for good and for bad ends.

In *Souls Forgotten*, Francis Nyamnjoh's characters narrate stories of witchcraft, including the lightning that was sent by the Abehema Chief, Ngain, to kill someone else. By the desecration of Lake Abehema, the people in Abehema also ran the risk of supernatural punishment by the spirits in whose name the lake was considered sacred. By positing a thesis where modern societies are characterized as risky, Giddens and Beck assumed that it is possible to clearly determine the ontological boundaries of modernity. The boundaries between the traditional and the modern may be at least some times fluid and indeterminable as is seen in all the three books about Mimboland by Nyamnjoh, where people rely on the traditional as much as on the modern.

Francis Nyamnjoh paints a picture where Mimboland is not cocooned in its geography. People in Mimboland rely on the modern as well as the traditional. They rely on the books, internet, and newspapers as well as on marabouts and diviner-healers for knowledge. The notables consulted diviner-healers after the Abehema disaster; a diviner-healer was also seen in hospital after the disaster. The people of Abehema

community accepted the promises of aid from Muzunguland but they denied Muzungulanders' explanations of the Abehema disaster as having mere natural causes. Perhaps Achille Mbembe's (2001) *On the Postcolony* summarises Mimboland: Mbembe argued that Africa moves in several directions simultaneously, and in Mimboland one finds a pastiche of approaches to life – be they based on what has been called the traditional or the modern.

In *The Disillusioned African*, for example, Charles celebrates his escapade to England: that he had experienced a flight, used the One Armed Bandit and was about to study philosophy in the Queendom; but he also laments the unsuitability of European education to Africa and he criticizes African leaders for being more erudite about things European than about the villages and ethnic groups in their nations. In *The Disillusioned African*, it is also indicated that even the English embrace their astrology, palmistry, horoscopes and taboos and therefore the mixed bag of the so-called traditional and the modern is not peculiar to Africa.

The pastiches of what is called the traditional and the modern speak to the arguments about multiple modernities by Eisenstadt (2000). Eisenstadt posits that there are multiple modernities which are shaped and adjusted by the contingencies of history in each region. Eisenstadt points out that there are modernities in communist societies, in Fascist societies, in western societies and in Latin American societies, Japan, Africa. Eisenstadt further argues that what changes is the social order and not the tasks that are performed to make societies function. In *The Disillusioned African*, Charles lamented the fact that African presidents like being kings and leading kingly life; once the colonial masters gave them political power (flag independence), they felt they had gotten all they needed. In *Souls Forgotten*, the Abehema chiefs are seen as corrupt and dictatorial in the same way as President Longstay is. The chiefs hid money from

the subjects and they also killed and used witchcraft. In *Married But Available*, the order of marital and love relationships changed: people assumed homosexuality, extra and premarital affairs, sex with snakes and with madmen.

Volker Schmidt (2006) brought up the thesis that there are varieties of modernity rather than multiple modernities. Her view was that multiple modernities imply heterogeneity and there is need to ask about the degrees of difference between the multiple modernities. The multiple modernities thesis was based on differences in civilizations based on national/regional boundaries like Japan, America, Asia, and Africa; but then, within these, there are also differences/varieties. Schmidt further argues that there are variations between modernities but there is also convergence *albeit* not necessarily identity. She argued that the emergence of bureaucracy, the waning of religious beliefs, the dominance of market economies are found in almost all civilizations; hence the convergence. Schmidt's views are useful in that they point to the similarities and differences between Mimboland and Muzunguland as noticed by Charles in *The Disillusioned African*. There was a wave of democratization sweeping across Africa which testifies to the thesis on convergence. In Africa, Charles noted, there was the convergence of external and internal forces to milk Africa of her resources.

Conclusion

Francis Nyamnjoh's books present his ethnographic material in a style that is accessible – even to non-social scientists – as it is humorous and engaging. The focus of the books on everyday life allows his work to cross disciplinary boundaries without being hamstrung by the baggage of abstruse theoretical concepts. The books can be useful in the arts, the film and media industries, studies of development, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies.

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