

Politique africaine

CALL FOR PAPERS

Religious Conversion in Acts: Scenes, Practices and Circulations

Coordinated by

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Deadline for submission of proposals: **15 September 2020**

This thematic issue aims to return to the phenomena of religious conversions as polymorphic social practices, and questions the various religious practices, temporalities and mobilities that result from them. The question of conversion has great historical depth, and gives rise to a diversity of interpretations and approaches, both epistemological and methodological (Buckser and Glazier 2003). Despite the abundant literature, however, conversion dynamics are generally understood in the social sciences in relation either to their spiritual dimension (Redford 1843; Brandt 2009) or their functionalist – or even utilitarian – dimension, covering

the field of the “rationality of religious conversion” (Decobert 2000). Moreover, the notion of “conversion” is more often analysed on the basis of its narrative, its “biographical illustrations” (Le Pape 2010), and therefore described in the form of a standardised and standardising narrative (Mary and Piault 1998; Fabre 1998), “rupture” (Meyer 1999) or “radical change” (Robbins 2007) in the life of the convert. In African societies, social, economic and political characteristics – “the functionalist paradigm”, in short (Willaime 1999: 22) – are generally mobilised as the preferred explanatory variables for explaining the conversions of individuals, pushing the researcher not only to move away from religious ideologies (Christian or Islamic in particular), but also to make the personal, or even intimate, dimension a secondary variable (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). In the case of conversions to Pentecostalism, for example, crises of meaning, dictatorships, poverty or insecurity – “anomie”, in a word (Durkheim 1975 [1897]) – appear as the first-choice explanatory narratives for individual or mass conversions, which are actually two phenomenologically different phenomena (Mahieddin 2015).

Conversion at an individual level: actors, materialities and societal dynamics

Number 182 of the *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* [Archives for the Social Sciences of Religions] (Savy and Sotinel 2018) presented an analysis of what might be seen in the public space as a result of religious conversion phenomena in the European and Mediterranean contexts from the end of Antiquity to the modern period from a more historical perspective. This dossier aims to expand this approach by questioning in a double sense – both phenomenological and semiological – the gestures, signs and staging of religious conversions in Africa. By crossing these two dimensions, which are intended to be attentive to what individuals show in their daily experiences, be it their relationship to themselves, to others or to surrounding society, we are invited to think about the phenomena of religious conversions through their use of signs, informing us about the different ways the actors experience situations and materialize their beliefs. The phenomena of conversions are not understood here as standardized narratives that mark a stabilized, fixed “before” and “after”, but rather as dynamic and performative processes, and the focus will be on the actors' social practices and the representations and imaginaries that underlie them. More specifically, our intention in the context of this topic is to read the phenomena of religious conversions mainly from the perspective of what is played out at an individual level (including in the case of collective conversions) for new and old converts alike, through gender, class and generational social relations, which is best seen from a “believing is doing” angle, at the crossroads of private and public. Conversion is understood here in relation to its experiential dimension, lived either as a practice or a specific way of inhabiting the self and the world, whether they be more or less intensively ostentatious experiences or more discreet forms related to questions of intimacy (including personal hygiene and sexual practices).

We therefore intend to question actors' performances, their signs and actions, what they say and do and their daily ways of doing things, not forgetting dissident voices, or even those “actors-watchers” (Millet 2019) who on occasion set themselves the task of verifying, validating and/or invalidating discourse, practices and attitudes, thus highlighting both the actors' experiences and the power relations that accompany them to varying degrees. The perspective conceived here allows us to look both at the way individuals act and give meaning to their actions and how this resolutely plural action questions the eternal dialectic of saying and doing. Following issue 123 of *Politique Africaine*, which was dedicated to religious pluralisation (Lasseur and Mayrargue 2011), it is a matter on the one hand of considering the ways in which the political and the religious are interwoven in the mechanisms of construction and

presentation of the self, and on the other of inscribing the debates surrounding religious African actors in contemporary discussions on the logic of religious recomposition (Berger 1971; Fouchar, Mary and Otayek 2005; Holder and Sow 2013; Lasseur and Mayrargue 2011; Giordan and Pace 2014) and the dynamics of individualization, which are not themselves immune to ambivalence, and occasionally even contradictions.

Converts in the city: identifications, subjectivations and power relations

Starting out from the actors and their own trajectories, their experiences and the ways in which they assert themselves and identify themselves as converts on a daily basis – that is, by focusing on individuality but without the proscribing approaches that would inform an analysis of the interactions between individual and collective experiences – this dossier, in line with the work on modes of subjectivation, invites us to think of religious conversions as more or less complex phenomena of the fabrication and signalling of new relationships to oneself, to others and to the social world, which can function in synergy, opposition or even conflict. The often impassioned debate on the effects of conversion on daily life reveals the extent to which the issues involved in understanding such transformations go beyond religion, and almost always lead back to politics (Michel 1994).

Focusing attention on individuals, their concrete practices and the conversion taking place (that is, on the games and stakes of the signs that actors invest and deploy to materialize and constantly (re)negotiate their adhesion-conversion) means not so much trying to determine what is or is not a "conversion" – or ethnographers' idea of what it should be – as concentrating on understanding what the act of conversion or relating it makes individuals do, and on the ways individual converts construct their everyday "reality", from practices and attitudes to representations and imaginations. In addition to the coexistence of multiple conceptions of what a "true conversion" is among the actors themselves, both in terms of individual temporalities and performative words or rites, which may also be in tension and contribute to further blurring the lines between what is or is not a "conversion", entry through "the snapshot of showing and the process of doing" (De Lame 2007:10) and modes of subjectivation raise a series of questions that restore a certain agentivity to individuals. Although this invitation to re-read the phenomena of conversion gives pride of place to the individual and the variety of his or her registers of action, however, the issue is not denying the importance of the tensions between the individual and the collective, and between personal and collective commitment, which are constantly at play in such social experiences, but using this empirical approach as a prism through which to analyse the way these phenomena are composed and recomposed and, above all, made visible.

How is the act of being converted, or of saying that one has been converted, mobilised to highlight specific ways of doing things and representations and new imaginaries? In the name of what visions of the world, what struggles and according to what strategies is this done? How and in what ways can it be a source of identity and social reconfigurations in private and public spaces? How and in what ways does it reveal itself to be at the heart of mechanisms for the elaboration of "new", social frontiers? What does it induce in terms of (re-)socializations? What porosities are at work? What are the power relations between the different actors involved vertically (religious leaders/charismatic figures and ordinary converts) and horizontally (between ordinary converts/among religious leaders), and how are they worked out through class, gender and generational social relations? How can this "believing" from a religious standpoint be assimilated to a specific "subjective expression of a being in the world", (De Lame, *ibid.*) in terms of innovations and adjustments, especially in comparison with other forms of belief, such as associative, political and artistic? What is the specificity of these "acts

of conversion" that more broadly implies questioning the construction modalities of the figure of the convert and its various declinations?

Thematic Areas

Deconstructions of identity and reconfiguration of social links

Without seeking to privilege particular socio-political contexts or religious movements, the issue is therefore to focus on a little-studied scale of socio-history, political socio-anthropology and the socio-anthropology of religions by approaching the phenomena of religious conversions from a relational engagement angle (Aubin-Boltanski et al. 2014). The objective is to concentrate on the problems raised by the "actor-converted" factor and their entanglements with the social practices engendered by the act of being converted. The aim, using what the converted subject allows us to see, is to understand the individual subject within a vast system of internal/external interactions in contact with a social universe, and thus avoid the difficulty of accrediting the "narrative effect" (Le Pape 2010), which is more a biographical reconstruction than a corpus of objective facts. Conversion generates external signs that have varied throughout history and are codified in an infinity of different forms according to national contexts, which are themselves inscribed in a transnational context. Situated at the frontier between the individual and the collective, the act of conversion can generate a real restructuring of social relations and imply a blurring of identity and family referents (Tank-Storper 2013).

Conversion can lead to reconfigurations of positions, identifications and social relationships – new individual behaviours, new relationships with the family and entourage, with space (Mary and Piault 1998; Fancello 2006; Mossière 2009; Timera 2011; Pons 2013; Boissevain and Le Pape 2014; Ehazouambela 2015), and in many cases also results in opposition to State policies. In other cases, far from simply translating logics of individual transformation, conversion can also invest the individual with a kind of new "mission" that consists in participating in the reconfiguration of society from a theopolitical perspective (Fancello and Mary 2010). A convert who perceives himself as a chosen one is not simply called to realize his own destiny here below, which can sometimes be translated into a valorisation of the entrepreneurial spirit (Haenni 2005; LeBlanc 2012; Luca and Madinier 2016; Millet 2019), and by staging the signs and material evidence of his "success": he can also be part of a broader mission, that of "restoring" the nation to which he belongs, echoing the highly controversial dominion theology that emerged in the United States in the 1970s and has since been popularized worldwide. In the Ethiopian context, for example, many neo-Pentecostal churches adhere to this vision (Coyault 2019), and it is a model that is clearly transferable to other African contexts and other forms of religiosity.

From this perspective, conversion can very quickly establish new modes of sociability (Fath 2005: 45), but also, through the intervention of supernatural beings – god in particular – new, more or less complex and constraining corporatized scriptures of the self, which include the believing subject in new forms of "communal individualism" (Willaime 2004: 171). In this regard, Joseph Tonda (2005) speaks of "de-parentalisation" to underline the weakening of clan or lineal kinship ties in favour of new forms of sociability and relationships that are emerging within the "community of believers". Other authors refer to a "realignment" of social relations (Engelke 2011) or a "restructuring" of family ties (van Dijk 2002).

New hybridizations, do-it-yourselfers and self-affirmation

The phenomena of religious conversion can also be approached from the perspective of plural religious paths that materialize from the daily experiences of individuals in different social, cultural and political contexts, thus allowing for the problematization of notions such as "do-it-yourself" (Lévi-Strauss 1962; Hervieu-Léger 2001b), "conversion careers" (Richardson 1978; Gooren 2010); "religious cohabitation" (Mbembe 1988: 32),); "religious transit" (Bastian 1997), "hybridism" (Canclini 1998), "religious libertine" (Mvoula-Moukouari 2007: 69-80), "religious plundering" (Soares 2009; Lasseur and Mayrargue 2011), "ecclesial nomadism" (Coyault 2013) and "religious papillonnage" (Millet 2019). By taking into account temporalities that differ from the narrative of conversion it would also become possible to gain a renewed understanding of the contexts of religious pluralism in Africa through the prism of lived conversion. The aim is to acquire a better understanding of both the religious mobility and movements of actors within the same group and several different religious groups (intra- and inter-religious mobility).

The use of these different notions and an analysis of the transformations in the relationship to oneself, others and the surrounding society that results from the act of conversion will make it possible to think more broadly of religious conversion as a set of bodily aesthetics and "techniques of the self" (Foucault 1988: 18) that engender more or less visible concrete actions on the bodies and in the daily work of a convert in multiple aspects of his life. The individual converted person shows his conversion – that is to say, the way he materializes and tinkers with it on a daily basis – through a set of more or less complex concrete practices, representations and new imaginaries that impact his body to various degrees. Thus, for some Pentecostal, Jewish or Muslim believers, the new experience of the world and of oneself is called to make sense corporeally. However spiritual it may be, the conversion that is taking place, which excludes neither questioning nor phases of relaxation (Aubin-Boltanski, Lamine and Luca 2014), is no less physical: it is lived in the body (Millet 2019).

Religious pluralization will also need to be considered in the context of the globalization of practices; the world of the Web in particular, with the multiplication and renewals of digital media it underpins, is becoming an excellent reservoir that encourages the transnationalisation of these ways of doing things, thus generating connected networks of practices, representations and imaginaries. This interconnection, which takes place through social networks, blogs, forums, online churches, church websites, mosques, temples, synagogues, etc., is writing – albeit not without tensions – a "new spiritual geography of the world" (Kamari-Clarke 2004: 4).

Drawing on the different angles we have proposed, we invite papers on all forms of religious (re-/de-)conversion, based on approaches that problematise the social practices generated by the act of (re-)conversion and also articulate the question of spaces and temporalities observable in African societies.

Calendar

15 September 2020: Deadline for submission of paper proposals (in French or English) to Pamela Millet millet.pamela@yahoo.fr, Hamida Azouani-Rekkas hamida.azouani-rekkas@ehess.fr and Bernard Coyault bernard.coyault@gmail.com

15 September 2020: Notification to authors of acceptance or rejection of their proposal.

3 February 2021: deadline for submission of articles to the journal.

For more information on the format of articles to be submitted, see the instructions to authors:

<https://polaf.hypotheses.org/soumettre-un-article>.

<https://polaf.hypotheses.org/soumettre-un-article/submit-to-the-journal>

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