

l'esclavage ne se manifeste plus qu'en situation de crise. Dans le premier cas, le fait qu'hier l'assujettissement des individus prétendait tirer sa légitimité de l'islam contribue à entretenir un entre-deux statutaire entre servitude et liberté, que perpétue une lecture réactionnaire des textes coraniques. Ainsi, beaucoup des anciens maîtres ou leurs descendants et pas mal des anciens esclaves ou leurs descendants, refusent toujours de considérer comme abrogée d'un point de vue islamique l'institution elle-même.

Après l'impasse « assimilationniste », qui envisageait l'esclavage en termes de parenté, et les excès théoriques d'une conception trop « économiste », il conviendrait dorénavant de revisiter, à l'instar d'Harris Memel Fotê, les usages de l'idéologie comme facteur de légitimation de l'esclavage puis, comme survivance à la disparition de l'institution elle-même.

English summary:

Reconfiguring Slavery aims to highlight the contemporary refractions of the servile slave-master relations of the period of slavery in the diverse societies of contemporary West Africa. Already extremely diverse in its uses in pre-abolition times, the use of the term 'slave' today has very little to do with its original meanings. In a varied but coherent collection of case studies to which Benedetta Rossi's stimulating introduction does full justice, the red thread is that of the multitude of ways in which the descendants of slaves attempt to evade the heritage of the past, how they negotiate the vestiges of the stigma in their contemporary lives, often in paradoxical and ambiguous ways.

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MATTHEW ENGELKE, *A Problem of Presence: beyond scripture in an African church*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press (pb £15.95 – 978 0 520 24904 2; hb £44.95 – 978 0 520 24903 5). 2007, 320 pp.

Matthew Engelke's *A Problem of Presence* is a beautifully written and theoretically elegant book. It breaks the theoretical mould of much of the scholarship on religion in Africa, and Christianity in particular, by steering clear of the political and economic analyses of its forebears. Influenced by the semiotic emphases of anthropologists such as Webb Keane, Engelke searches instead for central questions within Christian 'culture' and holds that this should form the basis of a comparative analysis between different traditions. In particular, he identifies a core paradox in Christian thought, namely the 'simultaneous presence and absence of God' (p. 9). He claims that the philosophical musings of Ricoeur and Hegel on the Christian God's transcendence and physical absence mark Christian thought and practice universally. As such, this book focuses on the 'hesitations, ruptures and gaps that exist between the language of presence and the dynamics of a lived faith, in which that presence is often uncertain' (p. 15). In his argument the 'problem of [God's] presence' then becomes essentially a problem of representation and authority. Faced with this problematic, he argues for a study of the 'relationships between language and material culture in culturally grounded modes of signification' (p. 9) rather than politics.

Engelke explores the problem of presence in the ethnographic context of the Masowe Chishanu Church in Zimbabwe, also known as the Friday Masowe Church. In Zimbabwe, the church's followers are widely known as 'the Christians who don't read the Bible' (p. 2), a heresy in a country where the

Bible is widely accepted as the word of God. The Friday Apostolics' rejection of the Bible stems historically from their founder-prophet's declaration that the Bible is a tool of colonial subjugation and a sign of white might. Johane Masowe also objected to biblical text-based knowledge as an obstacle to the kind of 'live and direct' faith he preached. When Johane later embraced the Bible again and declared Saturdays instead of Fridays as holy days, some of his followers saw this as a sign that he had fallen off the path and that John the Baptist's spirit no longer spoke through him. They broke ties with the Saturday Apostolics and started their own movement. Today, the Friday Masowes still reject the Bible as a 'stale' (p. 6) historical record with little relevance to their daily lives. Instead, they seek the living presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the True Bible, and are committed to 'a faith in which things do not matter' (p. 9). Christianity in their understanding, then, should be divested of the icons, texts, hierarchies and church buildings that hamper the communication between humans and the Holy Spirit. To this end, they meet in open spaces, reject the Eucharist, have a decidedly flat church hierarchy, do not collect money in church services and do not record their songs or prophecies. The Friday Apostolics' commitment to a live and direct faith is however constantly threatened; their healing practices are reliant on physical 'substances' while the authority of some of their prophets threatens to solidify in institutional power. Their rejection of the Bible is also fundamentally predicated on a deep knowledge of its contents (pp. 197–8), without which the prophets would find it difficult to ground their authority. In this book, Engelke sensitively illustrates how the Friday Masowe resist, circumvent and negotiate some of these paradoxes.

Although this book is ethnographically fascinating, this reviewer remains unconvinced by the universality of Engelke's 'problem of presence'. As he acknowledges, Hegel and Ricoeur are poor spokesmen for many Christians (p. 15) for whom God's sensible presence is not a 'problem'. Indeed, many Zimbabweans accept the unproblematic presence of (absent) invisible spirits and things (p. 42), while the Friday Masowe regularly revel in the sensory and bodily presence of the Holy Spirit during their services (pp. 171–223). And although the academic debate should not necessarily be dictated by the (local/localized) problems of our interlocutors, its dynamics and origins could subtly distort the ethnographic lens (cf. Marshall Sahlins, 'The sweetness of sadness: the native anthropology of Western cosmology', *Current Anthropology* 37: 395–428). In this regard, it is questionable whether the Friday Masowe's commitment to immateriality and the subsequent paradoxes in their practice of a live and direct faith evidence a struggle with the same type of questions that plagued late-modern Western philosophers. For one thing, God and Jesus seem to be sidelined in their commitment to the Holy Spirit and his presence. Despite this theoretical reservation, I would highly recommend Matthew Engelke's *A Problem of Presence* to anyone interested in the study of Christianity.

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