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- 1 In recent years religion has played a prominent role in international debates about how the world should be governed. In this ambitious monograph Ellis and ter Haar contend that Africa has stood at the heart of these developments and endeavour to show the myriad of different ways in which religious beliefs have shaped political action on the continent. They defend Geertz's view that we should first attempt to understand religious meanings before ascertaining their political significance. *Worlds of Power* provides a synthesis of various sources, including the writings of religious activists and is organised into nine chapters, entitled "ideas", "words", "spirits", "secrets", "power", "wealth", "morality", "transformations" and "histories".
- 2 In chapter two the authors reflect on the significance of Africa's long oral tradition for the study of religion. In a continent where powerful interests control the media and where news is often censored, they argue, people prefer information obtained in active conversation with friends on the streets. The rumours of "pavement radio", contain no clear boundaries between the real and unreal, and between the material and spiritual, and often refer to personal encounters with the invisible world. The authors see a parallel between conspiracy theories and spiritual beliefs: both posit hidden causes behind events and order loose facts into coherent wholes.
- 3 In chapter three, Ellis and ter Haar show how ancestors, witches and the Holy Spirit are seen not as personal agencies that affect prosperity and suffering in this world. They argue that far from being maladaptive, attempts to communicate with the spiritual world—such as divination and possession—enable people to express psychic tensions, acquire new knowledge and to renegotiate social relations to their own benefit.

- 4 In chapters four, five and six, Ellis and ter Haar view power and wealth through the prism of religious beliefs. The authors show how various forms of power are connected and overlap. They argue that as the anticipated benefits of democratisation fail to materialise, there is a renewed quest for spiritual power. Migrants seeking work in rich countries rely on spiritual protection, Islamic traders use religious networks to create trust, members of prosperity churches pay tithes for the promise that God will deliver riches in return, and politicians collaborate with religious functionaries of various sorts. They contend that these consultations often take place in secret and draw attention to the important political role of secret societies—such as Freemasons and Rosicrucians—amongst elite groups. At the same time, Ellis and ter Haar contend, social turbulence has contributed to demonising the spirit world. Neighbours are frequently accused of practising witchcraft, and businessmen and politicians of using medicine made from human body parts to increase their success.
- 5 In chapters seven and eight, Ellis and ter Haar address the themes of morality and personal transformation. They show how morality has been a field of much contestation with the establishment of mission stations and colonial bureaucracies, and with the imposition of discipline on Africa by financial institutions, ecologists and feminists. The authors refer to the dilemma posed by the problem of managing witchcraft accusations. Ellis and ter Haar also discern tensions between religious rites of passage, and techniques of the state that discipline people and persuade them to particular ways of thinking.
- 6 The authors advocate an historical approach that does not see new religious phenomena in terms of an authentic Africa nor as a recent response to globalisation. Religious beliefs are often a reconfiguration of older ideas. In a context where tradition coexists with modernity, religious rituals play an important role in remembering the past. In conclusion, they suggest that the idea that changing worldviews can open doors to economic and political progress in Africa is neither absurd nor unprecedented.
- 7 Ellis and ter Haar's theoretical points about the dangers of "oversociologising" religion and about seeing spiritual beliefs as a response to globalisation are well taken. For me the strength and weaknesses of the monograph both lie in its synthetic approach. The authors demonstrate an astonishing grasp of "behind the scenes" political events, successfully link diverse phenomena, and provide numerous general insights. But they do so at the expense of depth. I would have preferred further ethnographic substantiation of some claims. For example, that power has its ultimate origins in the spiritual world (p. 4), authority over the spirit world is translated into authority over people (p. 23), and that religious specialists were a check and balance in systems of governance (p. 147). These sound hollow, especially when made by advocates of an interpretive approach. Works of this nature are also bound to contain some over-emphasis and omissions. For me the elaborate discussions of experiences by heads of state and the comparisons to Europe, came at the expense of understanding grassroots processes in their own terms. I would also have appreciated more analyses of Islam in Africa. Notwithstanding these reservations, I found *Words of Power* extremely valuable. I can think of no better general introduction to the intersections of religion and politics in Africa.