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Bōkā or how one Religion sees another: Islamic discourses on 'African Traditional Religion' in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

Islamic discourses in West Africa that use Hausa as lingua franca commonly designate 'African Traditional Religion' as *bōkā*. I consider *bōkā* as ethnographic theory, i.e., as means to contemplate and make sense of the forms of life that it is embedded in and that it articulates. Accordingly, translating *bōkā* is anything but straightforward. I trace the various meanings of this term in Hausa ethnographies, dictionaries, and summarize an extensive conversation I had on this concept with a Hausa native speaker. I show how *bōkā* articulates and participates in a whole tradition and lifeworld. Having delineated the semantic field of *bōkā* in Hausa, I present the divergent and contested uses of the term in Islamic discourses in Asante in which various actors negotiate their conceptions of and relations to 'traditional' religion. To conclude, I reflect on how considering *bōkā* as ethnographic theory impacts academic translations and the work of theory.

KEYWORDS

African Traditional Religion; Asante; *bōkā;* ethnographic theory; Islam; religious encounters; translation; West Africa

> The issue of human differentiation will not be settled by more observation at the somatic level, but rather by theories of an intellectual sort. It will not be settled by taxonomies of differential exclusion but by comparative structures of reciprocal difference. It will be settled, at the level of culture, only by thoughtful projects of mediated discourse, by enterprises of translation, recalling that, whether intracultural or intercultural, translation is never fully adequate, there is always discrepancy. *Traduttori traditori*. And that, therefore, central to any proposal of translation are questions as to appropriateness or 'fit,' expressed through the double methodological requirement of comparison and criticism.
>
> (J. Z. Smith 2004, 316).

Introduction

How can we translate different language games and the forms of life that they are embedded in and that they articulate into one another? In this article, I take up this question in relation to so-called 'African Traditional Religions' and their translation into Islamic discourses in West Africa and into secular discourses in Western academia. I

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delineate how Muslim spokespersons in Ghana and Nigeria frame traditional religions as *bōkā* and discuss the contested meanings and (de)valuations that this designation engenders. As *bōkā* is embedded in Hausa traditions and articulates specific forms of life, it does not lend itself to summary translations into other languages or universalizing abstractions.[1] Therefore, I consider *bōkā* as ethnographic theory, i.e., as means to contemplate and make sense of its appertaining forms of life. Considering *bōkā* as theory simultaneously furthers our understanding of other lifeworlds, enriches our analytical frameworks, provincializes established concepts, and opens on multilayered conversations and forms of comparison across different traditions in which all participants stand to learn from one another.

This article sets off from a remark I overheard frequently among Muslims in Asante:[2] 'There is too much *bōkā* in Islam in Ghana.' Such is the common claim among Islamic reformists in the country, the so-called Sunna,[3] who strive to reform Islam into what they consider to be its pure and original form as contrived by the prophet Muhammad and his companions. Accordingly, the Sunna claim to purify Islam and campaign against anything they perceive as non-Islamic or illegitimate innovation (Arabic: *bidʿa*) in the religion of Islam, i.e., those ideas and practices which do not derive from their readings and interpretations of the *Qurʾān* and *Sunna* in a 'straight and positive way'.[4] Speaking of *bōkā*, the Sunna refer to those traditional religious practices and imaginaries that have been designated as 'African Traditional Religion' in academic literature. Their fellow Muslims agree with the reformists in considering traditional religious practices as *bōkā* and, accordingly, as un-Islamic; but they strongly resent the reformists' claim that 'there is too much *bōkā* in Islam in Ghana', as the Sunna frequently refer to certain practices and imaginaries as *bōkā* that other Muslims in the country consider and practice as part of the Islamic tradition. Hence, the appropriate uses of *bōkā* are quite contested among Muslims in Ghana.

Broadly defined, *bōkā*, as used among Muslims in Asante, refers to traditional spiritual practices and interactions with spiritual entities to achieve a desired result – curing afflictions, cursing others or sealing an oath, protection from malevolent spirits or witchcraft, success in love or business affairs, etc. (Pontzen 2021a; 2021b). This rendering of *bōkā* is rather vague. In this article, I have a closer look at the ethnography and the semantic field of *bōkā* to convey a more nuanced understanding of what the term connotes. Doing so, I show that *bōkā* implies a whole lifeworld and therefore must be considered in the

[1] As argued by decolonial thinkers, universalizing abstractions are also embedded in and articulate specific forms of life, in particular those of the imperial West and its heritage of the Enlightenment (Mbembe 2017; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Trouillot 2002).

[2] Asante is a region in southern Ghana. The fieldwork on which this article is based was carried out mainly in 2011 and 2012 in Kokote Zongo, a Muslim ward in the Asante town Offinso. Such wards are found widely across Asante and commonly designated as zongos (Pontzen 2021a; Schildkrout 1978). I revisited Kokote Zongo in 2013, 2017, and 2019.

[3] Their designation as Sunna derives as a shorthand from the name of their official organization, the *Ahl us-Sunna wal Jama'ah*. Both, the Sunna themselves and their objectors refer to this reformist group by its shorthand. On Islamic reform movements and discourses in Ghana see Dumbe (2013), Kobo (2012), and Pontzen (2021a).

[4] A core claim of my Sunna interlocutors was that they read and interpret the Islamic scriptures in a straight way. Based on these readings, they proclaim to purify Islam from illegitimate innovations, polytheism, and African borrowings or influences.

On Islamic reformist discourses, epistemologies, and ideologies of purification see Haj (2009), Meijer (2014), Østebø (2015). On the resulting polemics among Islamic reformists and other Muslims in West Africa see Kaba (1974), Kane (2003), and Loimeier (2016). As Adeline Masquelier (2009) and Benedikt Pontzen (2021a) show, Islamic reform is not only a matter of scholarly debate but also of people's lived religion.

relations that it makes and refers to if one wishes to grasp its meanings. As I argue, *bōkā* makes sense in its use in language, i.e., in the *Sinnzusammenhänge* (German: correlations of meaning; cf. Pontzen 2021a, 17–18) that various actors make and refer to when they use the term. Translating *bōkā* can hence not consist in reducing its meaning to Western concepts. Instead, I delineate the webs of meaning in which it acquires and makes sense (cf. Gardiner and Engler 2021), explore the coherences and social effects that the term engenders (Asad 1993, chap. 5; 2018), and bring these to bear on academic discussions of ('traditional') religion. As suggested by Rudolf Pannwitz, the task of the translator 'is to expand and deepen their language through the foreign one' (quoted by Walter Benjamin [1923] 1972, 20), and this is what I attempt to do by writing about *bōkā*.

In this article, I first reflect on *bōkā* as ethnographic theory. Thereafter, I present the multireligious context in which I came across this concept. Asante is a religiously diverse setting, where actors from various religious traditions – African Traditional Religion, Islam, and Christianity – do not only co-exist but constantly relate to and interact with one another. Accordingly, *bōkā* and the meanings that it makes must be considered against this background of religious diversity and encounters, especially given the fact that it is mainly used as a derogatory designation of traditional religious Others by Muslims in Asante. Having set the scene, I portray some *bōkā* practitioners and describe their practices and renderings of these, but as *bōkā* is only used in negative reference to Others and not as a self-designation in Asante, it is repudiated by Muslims and unknown among the Asante. Therefore, I make a detour via Hausa ethnographies and linguistics, where the term has more salience before I return to its use in Islamic discourses in Asante. Thereby, I engage with diverse discourses and lifeworlds in whose (re-)makings *bōkā* partakes. I do so not to pin down *bōkā* as it is or to find its ultimate point of reference but to follow its uses and to trace the diverse meanings that these make. In the conclusion, I reflect on how considering *bōkā* as ethnographic theory impacts on our concepts and work of theory.

Translating Bōkā and ethnographic theory

Bōkā is a Hausa term and hardly translatable into English or Asante Twi if one takes translation as same-saying or replacing a concept by its equivalent in another language.[5] *Bōkā* is embedded in Hausa traditions and articulates specific forms of life and was hence labeled as 'deep Hausa' by my interlocutors, i.e., as one of those Hausa terms that do not lend themselves to a straightforward translation as it is embedded in and articulates Hausa traditions and worldviews. Accordingly, *bōkā* is not readily translatable into other languages or forms of life. As suggested by Talal Asad in his reflections on translation, 'it is almost impossible to abstract an important idea that indicates something distinctive of a particular form of life and find a ready word in a language belonging to a very different form of life' (Asad 2018, 6).

Bōkā is a complex phenomenon and concept in its own right and should be taken as such, i.e., as what Giovanni da Col and David Graeber call 'ethnographic theory' (da Col

[5]Ghana's zongos were largely founded in the early twentieth century under colonial rule when Hausa-speaking Muslims moved into the region. Consequently, Hausa is one of the main lingua francas of the zongos and a language of Islamic learning among Muslims in Asante (Pontzen 2021a, 40–42). Otherwise, Asante Twi is the most widely spoken language in the region.

and Graeber 2011) and Sherry Ortner a 'key symbol' (Ortner 1973). Like *totem*, which is not symbol, *taboo*, which is not prohibition, *shaman*, who is not a priest, or *mana*, which is not force, *bōkā*, which is neither religion nor magic, can be considered as one of those ethnographic concepts that make for 'events, unclassifiable remainders that rearrange preconceived notions and categories by juxtaposing different cultural images and positions' (da Col and Graeber 2011, vi; emphasis omitted). Theorizing such ethnographic concepts requires

> a conversion of stranger-concepts that does not entail merely trying to establish a correspondence of meaning between two entities or the construction of heteronymous harmony between different worlds, but rather the generation of a disjunctive homonimity [*sic!*], that destruction of a firm sense of place that can only be resolved by the imaginative formulation of novel worldviews (da Col and Graeber 2011, vi–vii; emphasis omitted).

Creating meanings and ordering experiences, concepts bring worlds into being, and so does *bōkā*. As elaborated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his remarks on language games (Wittgenstein 1984a; 1984b; 1989),[6] 'the meaning of a word is its use in language' (Wittgenstein 1984a, §43). Accordingly, the philosopher's task is to trace and delineate the uses of a concept in language in order to understand the meanings that it makes and not to ascribe these meanings to something else (Wittgenstein 1984b, 39). As I show in the following, *bōkā* and the meanings that it makes do neither map onto Western concepts, nor are they readily contained by them. In line with this, my essay does not take *bōkā* as religion or magic, nor do I reduce *bōkā* to a manifestation of the latter. In this article, I trace the meanings that various actors in West Africa and academia make in using this concept, and I delineate the social effects that *bōkā* engenders. In common parlance in the zongos, *bōkā* refers to traditional religious practices and imaginaries and, by extension, to the whole sphere of so-called 'African Traditional Religion'. This use of *bōkā* is commonly agreed upon by Muslims in Asante who thereby not only frame a whole sphere of practices and imaginaries as *bōkā* but also demarcate these as un-Islamic. Consequently, the use of *bōkā* in reference to the religious doings and imaginaries of other Muslims is ardently contested and resented by them. Yet not only the uses of *bōkā* are ambivalent, but the meanings of the term are also quite ambiguous and opaque as diverse actors use *bōkā* in different ways and thereby lend disparate meanings to the term.

Thus, my article revolves around the question what meanings *bōkā* generates, what the term connotes, and how one can (im)possibly translate and understand it in other terms and concepts. In a certain way, the difficulties that *bōkā* poses to academia's allegedly universal and value-free analytic concepts mirror the ones encountered in academic renderings of so-called African Traditional Religions.[7] Instead of imposing our terms and understandings on these, we would be well advised not only to describe local concepts

[6] See Schulte ([1989] 2001, 130–73) and Sluga (2011, 57–75) for excellent discussions of Wittgenstein's notion of language games and Bouveresse (1977), Das (1998), and da Col and Palmié (2018) for anthropological takes on Wittgenstein.

[7] Originally, most African languages had no word for religion (Brenner 2000). 'African Traditional Religion' is a 20th century invention (Masuzawa 2005; p'Bitek [1971] 2011; Shaw 1990) and a secular concept with a complex history of re-appropriations and contestations on the continent (Idowu 1973; Mbiti [1969] 1982; Olupona 2021; Wiredu 1998). Meanwhile, English, French, and other European languages have become African languages over the generations, and the word 'religion' has been appropriated as a loanword and concept in the active vocabulary of many African languages. The multiple trajectories and entangled histories of religion in Africa remain to be explored in depth (Chidester 2014; Meyer 2021).

but to consider them as actual theory, i.e., as means to contemplate the practices, imaginaries, and phenomena that they connote and make sense of. This would allow us not only to grasp such concepts with their contexts but to re-consider our preconceived analytic terms as equally contextual and 'provincial' (Chakrabarty [2000] 2008). Our concepts, including the concept of religion (J. Z. Smith 1982), are always already embedded in specific language games and articulating certain meanings so that they do not lend themselves as readily to universalizing abstractions as their application as analytic terms tends to suggest (Asad 1993). Furthermore, we do not need such abstract universal concepts if we conceive of our renderings and comparisons of religious phenomena and discourses as hermeneutics, i.e., as possible conversations in which the participants stand to learn from and cope with one another (Rorty [1979] 2009, 318, 356; cf. Gadamer [1960] 1990; Lambek 1993). In a religiously diverse setting like Asante, such conversations and translations across traditions are part of people's everyday encounters.

Religious diversity in Asante

On September 21, 2017, I took a share bus from Offinso to Kumase which makes for a one-hour ride in dense traffic. As other share buses, this one had several stickers with religious messages on its body. A huge sticker on the rear proclaimed that 'Still Jesus', and some smaller ones on the front depicted Jesus on the cross. The driver was listening to Christian gospel on the radio which he turned down when some Muslims in the rear offered an Islamic prayer to ask for Allah's protection for the upcoming journey and in whose concluding 'Amen' all passengers joined as the car took off.

The enforced go-slow of the ride to Kumase gave me ample time to study the stickers on other cars passing by and the dozens of religious signboards lining the road. Most signboards depicted teams of Christian pastors inviting their readers to 'Seven Days of Revival', 'Miracle Conventions', or 'Breakthrough Services' stating the date and nearby location of the advertised event. Other signboards depicted Islamic scholars (Asante Twi: *malam*) offering their spiritual services to a prospective clientele, giving their name and phone number. On this stretch of the road, only few signboards belonged to traditional practitioners,[8] and a poster of a traditional 'spiritualist', which someone had glued to a wall overnight, was already stripped off and torn into pieces when I returned in the afternoon. Reaching the outskirts of Kumase, a Christian preacher boarded the bus and began holding a sermon to the passengers for which the driver turned down the radio again. The preacher admonished his captive audience to live by the Bible, to pray steadily, and to go to church regularly to gain God's benevolence and protection from the many evils of this world. At a major junction, where the journey came to yet another stand-still, a band played gospel music to the traffic. Some hundred meters down the road another Christian preacher had set up a massive PA system and preached the gospel to the slowly passing traffic. The preacher on the car forfeited before this soundscape and offered a final prayer after which some

[8]Traditional religion has no strong public presence on this part of the road, but traditional signboards and posters increase in number and prominence once one branches off the main road or turns around and heads in the other direction. This corelates with the absence of traditional religion from the front stage in Asante's public sphere (Pontzen 2018).

passengers donated some money to him to assure themselves God's blessings for what they were up to in town.

Arriving at Kumase's central bus station, I had to change cars to reach my destination. On my way to the next ride, I bought a bottle of Schnapps from one of the stalls at the station. I needed the Schnapps as a requested gift for the deity of the shrine I was headed to. The salesman, who was perfectly aware of what I was buying the Schnapps for, gave me a knowing wink and did not fail to alert his equally surprised colleague of me purchasing a gift for a traditional deity.[9] In the next car, a fellow passenger gave me a knowing look when she saw the bottle of Schnapps in my bag but kept silent on the rest. The remaining journey offered a similar display of religious stickers on cars and signboards along the road. As I alighted at my destination, I became aware that there were no signboards alerting one to the nearby presence of one of the most renowned traditional shrines in Asante whose deity was to receive hundreds of petitioners on that day. In Asante, traditional religion happens 'underground' as various interlocutors put it.

This presence and self-assertion of the different religious traditions in public space in Asante corresponds with the official figures according to which 78% of the population of Asante are Christian, 15% Muslim, and 5% Traditionalist (Ghana Statistical Service 2013, 63). Christians form the majority, and Christian actors and discourses are hegemonic in the public sphere (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004; Meyer 2011; 2015) where they set the topics and the terms of debates as they ardently preach against the evils of traditional religion. Accordingly, traditional religious practitioners have come under heavy pressure and, as people in Asante put it, 'gone underground' (cf. Lamote 2012; Meyer 2011; Pontzen 2018). When it comes to exclusive adherence, only few identified as what the state census questionnaire labels as 'traditionalist', but when it comes to actual practices and conversations, traditional religion matters to considerably more people than stated by the official figures of the census report. People in Asante attend in the thousands to the hundreds of traditional shrines and their deities on a daily basis, and traditional narratives and imaginaries permeate people's conversations, interactions, and interpretations of the world. As an 'underground' presence, traditional religion can surface any time, but it is commonly rather alluded to, as with the wink of the Schnapps vendor, or suspected, as with the knowing look I got from my fellow passenger. Furthermore, traditional religious practices, actors, and imaginaries are recurrent and central topics in Christian and Islamic discourses and hence anything but marginal in Asante. Christians frame traditional religion as 'the work of the devil' and pray to be delivered from it (Meyer 1999; Onyinah 2002), Muslims label it as '*bōkā*' and urge their fellows to repent and abstain from it (Pontzen 2014; 2018). Accordingly, *bōkā* is not a value-free designation but always already implying a negative value judgment. Yet, while Christian and Islamic discourses against traditional religion tend to propagate a 'complete break with the past' (Meyer 1998), the traditional practices and imaginaries that they refer to have a long history and a multi-layered presence as do the discourses by others on them.

Historically, African Traditional Religion is the first religious tradition present in Asante, Islam the second, and Christianity the most recent one. It is impossible to say when or how traditional religion emerged in the region, but the *Asanteman* (Asante Twi: Asante dominion) was co-founded around 1700 by a traditional *ɔkɔmfoɔ* (Asante

[9]On Schnapps and its history in Ghana see Akyeampong (1996).

Twi: priest possessed by deities): *Ɔkɔmfoɔ Anɔkye*, a famous and revered mythic-historical figure in present-day Asante who gave the Asante union its identity and moral Charta (McCaskie 1986). Throughout the centuries, people's lived traditional religion in Asante has been anything but unchanging or static; but given the present lack of substantial sources, it remains unclear whether and how its history could be written.[10] Muslims have been present as a minority in the *Asanteman* since its early days as immigrants or captives of war living under the tutelage of the Asante royals (Pontzen 2014; Wilks 2000). As Islam was a religion of strangers, Muslims were disallowed from proselytization, and rates of conversion to Islam by the Asante remained close to inexistent. Nonetheless, certain Islamic practices and objects, especially Islamic prayers and amulets, were and continue to be in high demand among the Asante due to their reputation to offer a strong protection against evil spirits or witchcraft (Owusu-Ansah 1991; 2000; Pontzen 2020). Over the generations, traditional practitioners have hence integrated certain Islamic practices and semiotics into the practices and things they offer at their shrines, and not a few of the deities possessing them are Muslims. In turn, traditional religion seems not to have had an impact on Islam in a similar way (Wilks 1968; 2000),[11] albeit present-day Islamic reformists proclaim this to be the case. This historical configuration changed significantly in the early twentieth century when the vast majority of people in Asante became Christians over the course of one generation. This massive religious change set off after the turmoil of civil war in Asante in the late 19th century and happened mainly under colonial occupation. Yet, the process of Asante's Christianization as well as its different actors and aspects remain to be comprehensively studied.[12] Presently, Christianity is the hegemonic religion in Asante, and while Christians and Muslims tend to acknowledge each other as worshipping God – albeit in different ways – , traditional religious narratives and practices are denigrated in their discourses and ousted as legitimate form of religious worship by them.

Accordingly, the term *bōkā* is derogatory and used to criticize or denigrate others in common parlance among Muslims in Asante, so that I could not find a single self-proclaimed *bōkā* in the region. Traditional religious actors in Asante are predominantly unaware of this designation of their practices by local Muslims as they are neither involved in Islamic discourses nor fluent in Hausa. Meanwhile, those Muslims who find themselves designated as *bōkā* strongly resent and reject this designation. Additionally, there is no term or concept in Asante Twi that could serve as a ready-made translation of the term. On the one hand, Asante Twi has no designation for traditional religion. On the other hand, Asante Twi has only recently become a language of Islamic discourses in Asante which are hence shot through with Hausa words and concepts. *Bōkā* is 'deep Hausa', as my interlocutors in the zongos put it, not only in the sense that it is hardly translatable into other languages, but as it refers to and implies a whole form of life. In what follows, I therefore take a detour via Hausa ethnographies and linguistics to delineate the meanings that the term engenders as it is used in Hausa language.

[10]First attempts to write histories of traditional religion in Asante are found in Akyeampong and Obeng (1995), Danquah ([1944] 1968), Konadu (2019), and McCaskie (1995; 2000).

[11]It is remarkable that Islam was present as a minority religion in Asante for about three-hundred years but impacted more on the majoritarian traditional religion than the other way around. However, the history of the interactions between practitioners of these religious traditions remains understudied, and we know not much of their mutual influences.

[12]For first attempts to write this history see Akyeampong (1999), Gilbert (1988), Lauterbach (2017), and Middleton (1983).

This is a deliberate and problematic detour, and I do not assume that its findings are readily transferable to Islamic discourses in Asante to which I will return thereafter.

Bōkā: ethnographic approaches

Consulting the registers of several Hausa ethnographies, I came across the following shorthand definitions of *bōkā*: 'a Muslim healer or any other practitioner of indigenous medicine' (Masquelier 2001, 98), 'a native doctor; a wizard' (Hill 1972, 212), 'magician-healers [who practice] divination and black magic' (Stock 1981, 367–68), 'non-Muslim priests [who treat ills and problems arising from the sphere of Maguzawa spirit cosmology]' (Gilliland 1986, 119), and 'herbalist' (Abdalla 1997, 118–23). As these divergent renderings convey, *bōkā* is not readily apprehended by or mapped onto Western terms.[13] According to these shorthand definitions, the term *bōkā* connotes a particular group of traditional religious actors and healers in Hausa society.

Meanwhile, in Islamic discourses in Asante, *bōkā* is not used in reference to a specific group of persons but to the whole sphere of their doings and appertaining imaginaries. I therefore rendered *bōkā* as 'the consultation and healing practices of the 'traditional' healers who work with the spiritual world' (Pontzen 2014, 355; cf. 2021a, 211–13) in my PhD thesis, attempting to encompass the diverse aspects highlighted in these definitions. However, I underestimated that these definitions assemble different aspects of *bōkā* in their juxtaposition and that these aspects do not lend themselves to a coherent summary. In fact, people's diverse uses of *bōkā* are inherently ambivalent and fraught with tensions: *Bōkā* is and is not Islamic, *bōkā* is and is not magic, *bōkā* is and is not a cure, *bōkā* is and is not a working with spirits. The disparate meanings of *bōkā* seem to depend more on who is using the term in what kind of discourse than on what one is referring to. Therefore, I turn to three ethnographies of *bōkā* and have closer look at how these ambiguities emerge and play out in *bōkā* discourses and practices.

The French ethnographer Guy Nicolas has conducted fieldwork in the Maradi Region of southern Niger in the late 1960s. His magnificent *Dynamique sociale et appréhesion du monde au sein d'une société hausa* (Nicolas 1975) gives a detailed French-style ethnographic account of the lifeworld of the Hausa he interacted with. Nicolas renders the *bōkāyē* (plural form of *bōkā* in Hausa) as 'diviners, healers, manufacturers, and distributors of talismans and charms […] who indulge exclusively in magic' (Nicolas 1975, 211) and who 'have the power to get in touch with the *iskōkī* [Hausa: spirits; Pontzen], even to fight them' (Nicolas 1975, 212). Nicolas expounds that the *bōkāyē* are at once venerated and feared for their extraordinary spiritual powers among their Hausa fellows and mentions that they are under heavy attack by some of the local Islamic scholars, who criticize their doings as un-Islamic, while the *bōkāyē* he interacted with consider themselves as Muslims (Nicolas 1975, 212).[14] In several ethnographic vignettes, Nicolas describes how the *bōkāyē* interact with spirits to find out whether they harass their clients, inquire the sacrifices and remedies that the spirits request to be appeased and leave

[13]The differences and outright contradictions of these translations simultaneously point to the ambiguous uses of the term in Hausa language and to the distinct positionalities of those who use (or translate) the term and how these affect the meanings that they articulate.

[14]This situation resembles what I encountered in zongos in Asante in the early 2010s.

their victims, and then have their clients offer these (Nicolas 1975, 335, 400). Nicolas also gives an account of how a *bōkā* becomes possessed and initiated into his art by a deity (Nicolas 1975, 399), and he describes how a *bōkā* draws a design on the ground combining Islamic semiotics with Hausa cosmology to influence the weather (Nicolas 1975, 346–47). According to Nicolas, the remedies (Hausa: *māganī*) that the *bōkāyē* manufacture commonly rely on and combine herbal lore, spiritual insight, and Islamic learning (Nicolas 1975, 400–409). As described by Nicolas, the *bōkāyē* straddle and work on several thresholds: one to the spirits, one to herbal lore, one to Hausa cosmology, one to Islamic knowledges and practices. As such, the *bōkāyē* differ from other traditional ritual specialists in Hausa society referred to as *annē* who sacrifice to local deities on behalf of their communities in public rituals, from the corporate *bōrī* possession cults, and from the Islamic scholars (Hausa: *mālamai*) with all of whom they have, nonetheless, certain things, practices, and imaginaries in common. In Nicolas' descriptions the *bōkāyē* thus appear as a quite ambivalent figures who draw on multiple and otherwise quite distinct traditions in their workings with the world of the spirits.

Lewis Wall, who has carried out fieldwork in a Muslim village community in the Katsina Region in northern Nigeria in the mid-1970s, locates the *bōkāyē* in the sphere of *Hausa Medicine* (Wall 1988). Wall renders the *bōkāyē* as 'consulting herbalists' who manufacture herbal remedies for their clients drawing on herbal lore, and who may or may not be possessed by spirits or find themselves in other special relations with them (Wall 1988, 244–47). According to Wall, *bōkā* displays 'a [wide] variety of personalities and styles of therapy' (Wall 1988, 247), and Wall portrays two *bōkāyē* and their practices in detail (Wall 1988, chap. 7). One is Uwarture, an elderly woman from a family of herbalists who became a *bōkā* after her encounter with a spirit in the bush[15] who obliged her to do this work. On the terms of her spirit, Uwarture was not to engage in divination or spirit worship, and she was not to take any money from her clients for the treatment, unless they offered it as *ṣadaqa* (Arabic: pious Islamic donation) after a successful therapy. Uwarture, who was a renowned and frequently consulted *bōkā* in her community, therefore framed her doings as *rōƙōn Allah* (Hausa: pleading with God) and not as *rōƙōn iskōkī* (Hausa: pleading with spirits), and she relied solely on her *ilimī* (Hausa: Islamic knowledge) and extensive conversations with her clients to decide on their treatment. The other *bōkā*, whom Wall depicts in detail, is Alhaji Audu Boka who was also a renowned and frequently consulted *bōkā* in his community. Audu belonged to a family of herbalists and had learned his herbal lore from his father. However, he did not have a spiritual encounter like Uwarture and hence framed his *bōkā* practices as traditional medicine (Hausa: *māganīn gargājiyā*). In his consultations, he relied on his *ilimī*, extensive conversations with his clients, and on various divination techniques to arrive at a diagnosis. In distinction to Uwarture, Audu asked his clients for a fixed amount of medicine money (Hausa: *kudîn māganī*) before his treatment, but he also received some *ṣadaqa* after his therapy had achieved the desired effects. Uwarture and Audu are both *bōkāyē* working with spirits, *ilimī*, and herbal lore to find a cure for their clients' afflictions, but they differ in certain regards. Thus, in Walls' account the two *bōkāyē* appear as 'individual [practitioners who vary in style and personality] and deal with individual matters' (Wall 1988, 276).

[15]As in Asante, the bush is conceived as home of the spirits among the Hausa.

The last ethnography I summarize here is by Markus Verne's discussion of everyday sorcery (German: *Alltägliche Zauberei*) among the Hausa of Zinder, a town in southern Niger, during the mid-1990s (Verne 1999). In his book, Verne recounts numerous conversations and interactions with Abbá, a mid-aged *bōkā* from a nearby village (Verne 1999, chaps. 3–5). Abbá stemmed from a family of herbalists and has learned his herbal lore and *ilimī* from his relatives. Yet, in distinction to his sister, who also worked as a *bōkā*, Abbá did not work with a spirit. After extensive conversations with his clients, during which he established their bodily and spiritual ailments, he asked them for a specific payment for his manufacture of the *māganī* needed to restore their bodily and spiritual *lāfiyā* (Hausa: well-being). In two detailed accounts, Verne describes how Abbá's *māganī* succeeded in curing a boy from illness but failed in restoring a faltering marriage. While Abbá framed his doings as Islamic and fully under God, Verne hints at the fact that people's attitude in Zinder towards the *bōkāyē* was 'coined by ambivalence, contempt, fear and silent admiration' (Verne 1999, 65). Hence, the term *bōkā* 'comprises a wide spectrum of persons who are somehow involved with curing but do not need to have much in common either [and who] can stand in widely varying relations to the world of spirits.' (Verne 1999, 57). As in the other ethnographies, the *bōkāyē* emerge as a quite ambivalent figures who are somehow involved and working with the world of spirits in Verne's account.

As it seems, this opacity and ambiguity are central features of *bōkā*. As described by Murray Last (Last [1981] 2007), who has conducted fieldwork in the northern Nigerian town Malumfashi since 1970, 'not-knowing or not-caring-to-know' is an institutionalized part of Hausa medicine (Last [1981] 2007, 1), and 'the range of traditional healers […] cannot be said to adhere to a single consistent theory or logic, except insofar as they are defined negatively, as not offering hospital or Islamic medicine[, nor do they] form an exclusive group' (Last [1981] 2007, 5). This opacity entails 'the lack of agreed medical vocabulary [and traditional medicine's being] extremely unsystematized in practice' (Last [1981] 2007, 6). In fact, the value people accord to the remedies of the *bōkāyē* lies in their 'very strangeness' (Last [1981] 2007, 5), so that their clients do not really know what the *bōkāyē* do, and they do not care to know either (Last [1981] 2007, 7). In turn, this strangeness opens on ambiguity and skepticism, especially as Islam has "colonized' the medical culture of the area [and accorded] non-Muslims an inferior status' (Last [1981] 2007, 3). Last thus demarcates traditional, Islamic, and hospital medicine from one another, but in actual practice, these lines are frequently crossed in people's quests for well-being and hence anything but clearly given. Consequentially, the semantic field of *bōkā* is as ambiguous as people's practices and relations to it, its sense depending more on the standpoint from which one speaks than on what one refers to.

Bōkā: the semantic field

The ambiguous uses and meanings of the term *bōkā* emerge promptly from a cursory survey of Hausa dictionaries which translate *bōkā* as 'quack doctor, wizard; usually used in a bad sense' (Robinson [1899] 1934), 'healer, doctor' (Mischlich 1906), 'soothsayer' (Bargery 1934), 'traditional healer' (Awde 1996), or 'soothsayer, magician' (Online Hausa Dictionary 2017). In their disparate translations, these dictionaries

render one of *bōkā*'s diverse and ambiguous aspects into its definition and thereby diverge in the meanings that they ascribe to this term. In search of further clarification, I approached a colleague of mine, Musa Ibrahim, who kindly agreed to have several conversations on *bōkā* with me.[16] Ibrahim is a native Hausa speaker from Kano in northern Nigeria. He is a Muslim, does not consult the *bōkāyē*, and has a rather neutral attitude towards them, though he considers their doings as continuation of the pre-Islamic *bamā-gujē* (Hausa: non-Islamic worship) and *magūzancī* (Hausa: belief in spirits). He knows of *bōkā* through rumors and stories he hears from others and could easily point out some *bōkā* houses in Kano, though he has never been to one himself.[17]

When I first asked him how he would translate *bōkā* into English, Ibrahim took a long pause for reflection, looked at me, and told me that he could not find a good translation as this is 'a typical Hausa word'. When I asked how he would describe *bōkā*, he gave the following initial explanation: 'a marabout, someone who uses religion and herbalism together to heal or harm. People consult him with their problems, and he provides them with concoctions, amulets, and 'spiritual things' to solve these.' According to Ibrahim, the *bōkā* practitioners and their clients consider such doings as Islamic while the hegemonic Islamic discourse in Kano labels these as *shirk* (Arabic: polytheism) as the *bōkāyē* interact with and depend on spirits in their doings. A *bōkā* can help others because he has 'the mastery, knowledge, and spirituality to intervene in their problems', and this is what their petitioners ask for. Therefore, Ibrahim considers the *bōkāyē* as 'spiritualists' in distinction to the herbalists (Hausa: *māgorī*) who also use herbs and herbal lore in their manufacture of remedies but who do not work with spirits.

As the Hausa saying goes, '*bōkā maigani har hanci.*' (A *bōkā* sees straight to the intestines.) The *bōkāyē* see into things in spirit and can use this insight to do things beyond ordinary comprehension, a competence referred to as *dābo* (Hausa: conjuring) in Hausa. In general, the *bōkāyē* work in their homes, they may be possessed by a spirit, they may use divination techniques or incense to communicate with the spirits, and they may ask their clients to offer a sacrificial animal if the spirits should demand that. As the *bōkāyē* work with spirits, Ibrahim locates them in a broader spiritual sphere together with Islamic scholars (Hausa: *mālamai*), possession cults (Hausa: *bōrī*), and those who work different forms of magic (Hausa: *maitā*, *sihirī*, *tsāfī*).[18] In distinction to the Islamic scholars, whose cures he designates as *ruqiyya* (Hausa: prophetic medicine), Ibrahim perceives the *bōkāyē* as not belonging to the sphere of *addīnī* (Hausa: the religion of Islam), though they might also draw on or use the *Qurʾān* in their doings. In distinction to the *bōrī*, the *bōkāyē* are not initiated into a cult, nor is a *bōkā* necessarily possessed by a spirit as is the case with members of the *bōrī* cults. In distinction to those who work magic, the *bōkāyē* are not *per se* assumed to follow evil purposes, and they do not work on their own accord but on request of their clients and in interaction with spirits. Their differences notwithstanding, the *bōkāyē* and the other 'spiritualists'

[16]Our main conversations took place in Bayreuth on May 23 and July 25, 2017, and we had several shorter chats on the topic and my findings since then. Our conversations were in English.

[17]After our first conversation about *bōkā*, Musa Ibrahim posted in several Kano groups on social media and received numerous replies. As in Kano, the knowledge of traditional practitioners and their locations circulates in personal conversations and in the form of rumors in Asante as well.

[18]Translating *bōkā* as magic would neither do justice to its distinction from this sphere by Hausa speakers, nor would it adequately convey the different forms, meanings, and values of magical practices that the more nuanced Hausa vocabulary allows for. As for *bōkā*, these Hausa concepts are not readily apprehended by or mapped onto Western ones.

have one thing in common: All of them manufacture *māganī* – a thing, spell, or substance that provides those who use or consume it with *lāfiyā* (Hausa: well-being) and *sāʾā* (Hausa: luck, appointed time).

It is with reference to the animal sacrifices that they demand from their clients, their invocations of the spirits, and the popular perception of their practices and imaginaries as continuations of pre-Islamic ones – although these have certainly changed over time – that the *bōkāyē* and their doings are labeled either as *ḥarām* (Arabic: forbidden by Islamic standards) or as *shirk* by their Muslim critics in Kano. Due to the hegemonic Islamic critiques and denigrations of their practices, the *bōkāyē* and their doings are kept 'under cover' and are rather alluded to and suspected than publicly known of, which certainly adds to their ambivalent perceptions in Kano. According to Ibrahim, 'the *bōkāyē* do not come out'. This statement and perception resonate with the uses of *bōkā* I encountered among Muslims in Asante.

Bōkā in Islamic discourses in Asante

As other Islamic scholars in Asante, Sheikh Abdallah, a reformist Sunna imam, uses the term *bōkā* in reference to traditional religious practices and imaginaries to which he is strictly opposed. In his sermons, counseling, and conversations he constantly admonishes his listeners to abstain from *bōkā* and to repent if they had used it in the past.[19] *In sha' Allah* (Arabic: so God willing), God will accept their repentance and grant them entrance to Paradise on the Day of Judgment despite their involvement in *bōkā* which, in the eyes of Abdallah, constitutes the only unforgiveable transgression of God's commandments (*Qurʾān* 4:48): *Bōkā* constitutes polytheism (Arabic: *shirk*) as its practitioners invoke spirits and other deities besides or instead of Allah and thereby not only turn away from God but engage in polytheistic forms of worship. But Abdallah is critical of *bōkā* on other grounds as well. The animal sacrifices that the *bōkāyē* ask for are like those offered at traditional shrines and therefore no part of Islamic worship. The divinations that the *bōkāyē* perform come tantamount to *kufr* (Arabic: rejection, disbelief) for him, as the *Qurʾān* repeatedly states that only God knows the unseen (6:59, 27:65, 72:26). And Abdallah ascribes dubious intentions to the *bōkā* practitioners and their clients; otherwise, they could 'come out' and stand by their practices, but they rather opt for 'going underground'. While Abdallah's referring to traditional religious practices and actors by the term *bōkā* is shared by all Muslims in the zongos, his use of the term in reference to the doings of some of his fellow Islamic scholars is ardently rejected and contested by them. While Abdallah perceives their practices as contaminated by traditional religion and therefore as un-Islamic, these Islamic scholars and their clients consider them as part and parcel of the Islamic tradition and therefore refuse their designation as *bōkā*. Once more, whether one refers to something or someone as *bōkā* depends rather on where one stands on these matters than on what one refers to.

Due to the ensuing debates among these different actors, *bōkā* is a central topic in Islamic discourses in the zongos and the people of these wards talk a lot about what to consider as *bōkā* and what to do about it. The people of the zongo commonly agree

[19]The following derives from numerous conversations and participation at his sermons and counselling.

that Muslims should abstain from *bōkā*, so they seek to distance themselves from it and its practitioners. However, personal distance is not sufficient as *bōkā* is not only something one uses but something which might affect one as well. If one dreams of a jinn harassing one or if one has some strange feelings about this, one attends to the *malams* in search of spiritual protection. The *malams* prompt one to offer specific prayers, and they pray on behalf of their petitioners, asking God for his blessings and protection. Furthermore, they ask their petitioners to share out ample *ṣadaqa* to please God and receive his blessing, and they manufacture *ruqiyya* for them. All these measures aim at re-establishing God's presence and blessings (Arabic: *baraka*) for the requesters so that the jinn are expelled and kept at bay, as they cannot harm one except by the leave of Allah (*Qurʾān* 2:102). The Islamic scholars of the zongos thus perform various acts to expel *bōkā* and its effects or to keep them at bay by establishing a divine presence for their petitioners, *in sha' Allah*.

The shared negative assessment of *bōkā* among Muslims in the zongos notwithstanding, Abdallah and other malams frequently complained about the fact that their Muslim fellows made use of *bōkā* because of its material and spiritual promises. Accordingly, they repeatedly had to advise their fellows on what to do if they regretted this and wished to repent. As for the protective measures, the aim of one's repentance should be to distance oneself from *bōkā* and its outcomes. Thus, Abdallah and other malams prompted the *bōkā* users to repent by stating their transgressions before Allah and asking him for forgiveness. Thereafter, they should pronounce the profession of faith (Arabic: *shahada*), proclaim their intent to purity themselves from their transgressions, and perform a major purifying bath (Arabic: *ghusl*) to re-enter Islam again. In addition to that, they should offer prayers, live by Islamic norms, and share out ample *ṣadaqa* to regain God's blessings. The *ṣadaqa* given to this end should surpass the amount spent in *bōkā*, otherwise Allah would not accept it or consider their repentance valid.

Yet, while such Islamic discourses and practices aim at creating distance and reject *bōkā* practices, these are nonetheless continually present 'underground' and inform Islamic discourses and imaginaries in Asante in various ways. One of these ways was narrated to me by Hussain Zakaria, a traditional Islamic scholar.[20] According to traditional narratives, every water has at least one deity (Asante Twi: *abosom*) dwelling in it, and Hussain Zakaria finds these narratives corroborated by the *Qurʾān* which relates how God punishes evil jinn with flaming fires (72:8–9). Burnt by God's fire, the jinn dive into the waters of the Earth to cool their wounds, thus come to dwell in these, and are then framed as *abosom* by traditional religious actors. Hussain Zakaria thus re-frames the traditional deities as jinn who are considered as purely spiritual beings in Islamic discourses as well. As traditional practitioners also consider the *abosom* to be purely spiritual beings, such a translation of *abosom* into jinn works well whilst it nonetheless reframes them and the legitimate dealings with them. However, some other creatures in the traditional cosmology are not as easily apprehended in Islamic terms: the *mmotia* (Asante Twi: fairies, little people) who dwell in the forest and tend to harass or possess human beings. As the *mmotia* are spiritual *cum* corporeal beings they run counter to Islamic discourses in Asante who assign this kind of being only to humans. Accordingly, the *mmotia* are commonly considered to be non-Muslims, but the people

[20]The following is based on several conversations which took place in 2011 and 2012, Kokote Zongo.

of the zongos remain uncertain about how to perceive and deal with these beings, especially as they are frequently harassed by them. As the whole sphere of *bōkā*, the *mmotia* tend to unsettle Muslims in Asante and therefore frequently surface in their discourses. Furthermore, local Islamic discourses share certain central topics, like spirit possession (Asante Twi: *akɔm*) or witchcraft (Asante Twi: *bayi*), with traditional ones and often retell stories from these as illustrations of what they admonish against. Thereby, traditional narratives and topoi find themselves transferred into Islamic ones and impact the imaginaries of their participants. Traditional religious narratives and *bōkā* thus proliferate as recurrent, albeit repudiated, topics in Islamic discourses in Asante which, in turn, affect how people conceive, value, and relate to them. Meanwhile, *bōkā* is not only a highly ambiguous topic in Islamic discourses in Asante, but it also poses a challenge to secular analytic terms established in academic discourses, as it speaks of and implies a different lifeworld.

Conclusion

As a 'deep Hausa' term, *bōkā* seems to be non-translatable (at least in an unambiguous way) not only into English but also into Asante Twi. In Asante, Islamic discourses are nowadays frequently held in Asante Twi, but people stick to the Hausa term *bōkā* when they speak of traditional religion and spiritual practices. It is not only that Asante Twi has no equivalent term for *bōkā*, but the whole sphere of traditional religion has no proper designation as such, and a vocabulary to speak about it is close to inexistent in Asante Twi. Meanwhile, Hausa provides its speakers with a highly refined and differentiated lexicon to refer to, talk, and argue about spiritual and traditional religious matters. These refinements and differentiations made in Hausa language practices are not translatable into the more limited and undifferentiated lexical fields of Asante Twi or English.[21] Nevertheless, *bōkā* is rather uncanny and ambiguous in Hausa as well, as the term connotes 'something strange' which lies beyond ordinary comprehension. As used in Hausa, *bōkā* refers to someone who works on the threshold to the world of the spirits or even with them, drawing on various traditions, means, and practices to achieve a desired effect. How the *bōkāyē* and their doings are framed derives in part from their self-presentation, depends in part on what they draw on in their practices, and lies in part in the eye of the beholder (including academics writing about them). At least, this is what I learned from my conversations with Sheikh Abdallah, Hussain Zakaria, Musa Ibrahim, and other people in the zongos as well as from my readings of the literature. *Bōkā* circulates in the diverse stories and divergent narratives which use and, in the act, make sense of it. Such narratives and the meanings that they make can be transferred into other languages or lifeworlds not in one-to-one translations but in their retelling. These retellings and their resulting transfers of meaning involve complex mediations and re-framings as seen above with Hussain Zakaria. As used among Muslims in Asante, *bōkā* refers to the whole sphere of traditional religious practices and their corresponding imaginaries from which Muslims seek to demarcate

[21] See the diverse Hausa terms for magical practices mentioned above which refer to various practices and imaginaries whose differences are glossed over in their summary translation into *bayi* in Asante Twi or witchcraft or magic in English.

themselves, and this is why Muslims in Asante use the term as a critique of their religious Others and resent it as a designation of their own doings.

As a quite complex and contested concept, *bōkā* not only implies a whole lifeworld but serves people with specific ways to make sense of, interpret, and act on the world. Accordingly, I suggest to take it as part of people's knowledge of the world (Barth 2002; Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1967). Hence, *bōkā* is not readily grasped or contained by Western terms and concepts but provides 'ethnographic theory' (da Col and Graeber 2011), i.e., the possible opening of conceptual spaces which allow one to 'rearrange [one's] preconceived notions and categories by juxtaposing different cultural images and positions' (da Col and Graeber 2011, vi). Exploring the concept of *bōkā* and the meanings that it makes, allowed my interlocutors and me to exchange diverse narratives, to discuss our divergent concepts, and to engage in open conversations in which we stood to learn from one another. Therefrom, I could not only gain better insights into other lifeworlds and values but also came to re-consider the allegedly universal terms and concepts that are used in academia as being as provincial and historical as they or, for that matter, *bōkā* are (Chakrabarty [2000] 2008; Crick 1979; Needham 1972; Trouillot 2002).

Our languages bring worlds into being: 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' (Wittgenstein 1984a, §19). This insight does not entail that we reject, devalue, or abandon Western concepts but that we re-contextualize them in conversations with other lifeworlds and traditions and by revisiting their genealogy and rootedness in their respective language games (Asad 1993; Chidester 2014; W. C. Smith 1962; J. Z. Smith 2004). If we are looking for better ways to understand and live with one another, we should start by conversing and thinking across traditions (Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey 2016) and by making space for one another in our languages, as conversations and mutual understandings are far more valuable than to enclose others in one's own terms.

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