INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists and historians of eastern African societies have long shared a common interest in the description and analysis of African religions and beliefs. Spirit possession, mediumship, witchcraft beliefs, diviners and divinatory techniques, the role of prophets and the nature of prophetic traditions are all subjects for which there is now an extensive, and still growing, body of literature. For virtually no group of the present ethnographic map of eastern Africa do these topics remain unstudied. Yet the sheer diversity of the material has contributed to a degree of confusion in the analytical categories and labels that have been employed in describing such religious phenomena.

One problem is the flexibility of the terminology used. In their search for a neutral, even clinical, language by which African religions can be described, analysed and compared, modern Africanist scholars have tended to employ a few all-encompassing terms in a wide variety of situations. ‘Spirit possession’ and ‘spirit medium’ are two such terms, and they have been applied to virtually everything from affliction to prophecy. The elasticity of the spirit possession vocabulary, as developed in the important collection of studies edited by Beattie and Middleton, *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* (London, 1969), has been its great success, but it is now introduced in so many cases that internal distinctions are blurred and incompatible comparisons are suggested. To a certain extent scholarly vocabulary for religious figures and religious activities has contracted: possession and mediumship have appropriated divination and prophecy, and the trend has been towards merging the two categories without regard to the distinctions between them. In eastern African studies, if not elsewhere, the terms ‘prophet’ and ‘diviner’ have become almost interchangeable; they are sometimes even used to qualify each other, as in ‘diviner-prophet’ (a term beloved more of historians than of anthropologists). At the same time the perfectly descriptive though seemingly old-fashioned word ‘seer’ has all but disappeared from scholarly discourse. As the range of terminology in use has narrowed, the surviving labels have suggested similarities that do not in fact exist. For example, it is clear from the existing ethnography that the figure of ‘prophet’ among the Western Nilotic Nuer is quite different from the ‘prophet’ in the Eastern Nilotic Maasai. In superficial respects the activities of these two figures may be thought similar: but closer examination of the internal distinctions drawn within Nuer and Maasai societies between types of religious figures and spiritual power, as well as the different public expectations aroused by these figures, reveals a more complex picture. Viewed in a more precise social and temporal (not to mention spiritual) context the term ‘prophet’
as applied equally to Maasai and Nuer has become mere shorthand for groupings of categories that are only remotely linked in form and function. A term applied so broadly risks devaluation. There is the added danger that, as historians and anthropologists in eastern Africa continue to use the same terms in rather different ways, our common vocabulary will cease to communicate the same ideas. The distinctions we draw inevitably shape the comparisons we make: it is time for a more careful consideration of the categories we define and the labels we employ.

The study of prophecy is inevitably entangled with the related issues of prediction, divination, revelation, possession and inspiration. The papers collected in this issue of Africa are part of a conscious attempt to disentangle these issues. The aim here is to offer accounts of spiritualism, divination and inspiration that are rooted solidly in the societies in which these phenomena have occurred and are occurring. This is an investigation of diversity and dissimilarity, based on close attention to the ethnographic specifics. Rather than refine our vocabulary or offer a new set of terminology, we are urging that social specificity should come before categorisation or comparison; that there should be a greater awareness of the historicity of particular religious figures and phenomena. Practices and perceptions change with time; it cannot be assumed that they are ‘embedded’ in any society.

Divination most commonly being classed with prophecy, because of its predictive and revelatory features, Suzette Heald offers some striking insights into Gisu divinatory failure. Divination, at least among the Gisu, reveals only that which has happened; it is not predictive. Diviners are resorted to only to find out the cause of a misfortune which has already occurred. The authority of the diviner—the acceptability of his finding—hinges upon public arbitration and is subject to a number of tests. Far from being a clever social manipulator in Turner’s sense, the Gisu diviner’s social influence is seriously hampered by public scepticism. Because of this scepticism, and because of the retroactive arena of divinatory revelation, Heald suggests, divination does not here merge into moral prophecy, and the diviner remains distinct from the prophet.

The distinction between revelatory and predictive findings is worth bearing in mind when considering the role of diviners elsewhere in eastern Africa, but it cannot be applied so neatly everywhere. Elliot Fratkin provides us with an example of a Samburu loibon practising his trade among the Rendille. The techniques of divination he employs are described in detail, and here again the interaction between practitioner and public is very apparent. The broad technique of ‘reading’ objects thrown in divination is widely understood, and the audience is able—indeed, is encouraged—to confirm or deny the interpretations offered by viewing the evidence which is placed before them. Scepticism is again part of the process, and the competition between various practitioners of divination is openly acknowledged. As among Gisu, Rendille may consult more than one practitioner regarding the same complaint. The loibonok are neither ‘priests’ nor ‘prophets’ in the sense that Evans-Pritchard applied both terms to the Nuer, Fratkin reminds us; they are too closely associated with
sorcery to be either creators or guardians of a moral community. But their ability to ‘see’ what is hidden places them in regular demand.

The powers of the loibon as diviner are thus mainly revelatory, yet in his power to ‘see’ distant events he also aspires to the power of prediction, seeking to influence decisions over the future movement of livestock, activities in response to the timing and intensity of rains, and so on. The success of Lekati Leaduma in such predictions among the Rendille seems limited, to say the least, yet other Maasai loibonok are able to establish widespread reputations for prediction as well as for divination. It is on the basis of the reputation of a few that the word ‘prophet’ has been generally applied to all loibonok. Paul Spencer provides a counterpoint to Fratkin’s specific focus upon a single loibon with a general assessment of the social roles of the loibonok in relation to their individual domains within the wider Maasai community.

The loibon is an outsider who, none the less, has intimate knowledge of his own domain. This knowledge is believed to come through a mystical empathy with that domain, though it is also admittedly gained in part through the widespread information network provided by the moron. As a diviner the loibon is a trained manipulator of oracles revealing sorcery and misfortune. But his ability to ‘see’ right into the area of his domain, to see the snares of sorcerers, is what enables him also to cast spells on behalf of those who consult him. The loibon, unlike the Gisu diviner, does more than label misfortune, he also appears able to offer protection. That protection combines the acquired technique of casting spells with the mystical ability to ‘see’, and therefore to aim all the more effectively. While the loibonok reject suggestions that they themselves are sorcerers, they encourage their clients’ belief in sorcery. This ambiguous relationship with sorcery helps to feed the continuous rivalry between loibonok.

If ‘seeing’ is crucial in distinguishing the loibonok from other types of diviners in eastern Africa, then perhaps more attention should be focused on ‘the seer’ in African society. Malcolm Ruel describes a number of differing but overlapping categories of practitioner among the Kuria, where the inspiration of the seer comes, not through the acquired technique of manipulating oracles, but through the ability to interpret correctly one’s own dreams. The abarooti—seers—of the past were able to provide insights into the immediate future, and offered advice on how best to meet or counteract future events. Significantly, as the protective role of the seer (especially in warfare) was made redundant by political and social changes during and after colonial rule, so today there are no active seers. Yet Ruel has observed a transformation in Kuria attitudes towards some of the known seers of the past. A new term, influenced by Swahili Islam, has been invented. Some of the abarooti of the past are now described as abanaabi—prophets—with the ability to foresee and foretell significant moral changes in Kuria society. Thus claims which were not contemporary are retroactively made; the Kuria now assert that they were indeed forewarned about the present in the past.

The interplay of past with present in shaping social explanations of religious phenomena is also evident in Andrew Mawson’s account of the political struggles surrounding the central shrine of the Agar Dinka. Here
the importance of public perception and expectation comes to the fore. The interaction between religious figures and their public is crucial. The conflict described in this article concerns the separation between administrative (secular) and ritual (spiritual) authority which was the outcome of the Dinka’s long experience of Egyptian and British colonial rule. The periodic rebuilding of the shrine symbolises the solidarity of the community, and the successful completion of the task depends upon the cooperation of spiritual figures operating in discrete, though linked, spheres. Rivalry between those figures threatened the whole process of the shrine’s renewal, and the ensuing debate revolved around the origins and transmission of spiritual inspiration and power, leading to differing interpretations of the basis of present authority. For the Agar Dinka, as for the Kuria, the roles and definitions of religious figures are matters for recurring debate and reformulation. They are by no means fixed.

Underlying the political struggle over the Dinka shrine was the pressure of war in the southern Sudan, a factor which in this and other parts of Africa has been closely associated with the prevalence and resurgence of the activities of diviners, spiritualists and prophetic figures. Tim Allen gives us a detailed account of one such, the spirit medium Alice Lakwena, who came to prominence with her Holy Spirit Army in northern Uganda during the late 1980s, and at one point seemed in a position to take a powerful role in the politics of Uganda before her ultimate defeat and subsequent flight across the border to Kenya. Alice attracted much international attention, and the thrust of Allen’s argument is a reaction against the populist, but seriously misleading, rendition of her story. Far from being the creation of the brutality of war in northern Uganda, Allen is able to demonstrate that Alice fits into a wider, and historically rooted, idiom of spiritualism in the region. The civil war did not bring Alice into existence; rather, it redirected existing processes into addressing the spiritual and moral issues thrown up by that war. Moreover, Alice is just the most prominent of many women spirit mediums in this region of eastern Africa. It is not their possession which has brought them to the fore; they have come to the fore bringing their own forms of possession with them.

Collectively these articles highlight the value of continuing research into the specific variety of African religious phenomena. Clearly there is much to distinguish between the northern Ugandan spirit mediums, Kuria seers and Maasai loibonok, though the same word ‘prophet’ has been applied in the ethnography to all such figures in the past. What the editors would like to emphasise from these cases—and which is true of other cases as well—is the importance of the passage of time, with its concomitant social changes, in altering practice, perception and explanation of religious phenomena. First, this is especially evident in the case of prophecy. A major distinguishing feature of prophecy is its historical nature. A prophet must work through time, and the prophetic message must be validated by time. In this way persons who never attempted to be prophets in their own lifetime may be recognised as such by later generations. Retroactive validation links the past with the present, and in so doing can reshape the definition of present actions and future intentions. Second, whilst internal labels may be altered, certain internal distinctions may remain in force: as
between revelation and prediction, or between acquired skills and inherent powers. Such internal distinctions are profoundly important, and should not be obscured by an over-generalising label. Third, the public validation of diviners, seers and prophets (alluded to here by Heald, Fratkin, Spencer, Ruel and Mawson) is an essential element in understanding the nature of the authority or power which such figures claim. Where scepticism is rife, all must justify their claims and demands to their audience. In doing so they call upon the past as often as they relate events to the present, or allude to the future. For this reason, the study of these religious phenomena in eastern Africa requires an approach that pays attention to past and present ethnography, and which blends history—a consciousness of the passage of time—with anthropology.

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FIG. 1 The location of the communities discussed