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AFRICAN TRADITIONS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN AFRICA

Edited by
Afe Adogame,
Ezra Chitando
and
Bolaji Bateye

African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa

Emerging trends, Indigenous Spirituality
and the Interface with other World Religions

Essays in Honour of Jacob Kehinde Olupona

Edited by

AFE ADOGAME

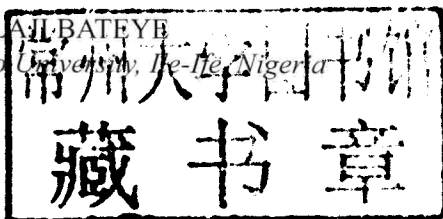
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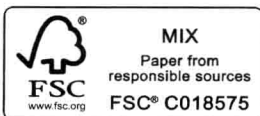
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AFRICAN TRADITIONS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN AFRICA

The historiography of African religions and religions in Africa presents a remarkable shift from the study of 'Africa as Object' to 'Africa as Subject', thus translating the subject from obscurity into the global community of the academic study of religion. This book presents a unique multidisciplinary exploration of African traditions in the study of religion in Africa and the new African diaspora. The book is structured under three main sections – Emerging Trends in the Teaching of African Religions; Indigenous Thought and Spirituality; and Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Contributors drawn from diverse African and global contexts situate current scholarly traditions of the study of African religions within the purview of academic encounter and exchanges with non-African scholars and non-African contexts. African scholars enrich the study of religions from their respective academic and methodological orientations. Jacob Kehinde Olupona stands out as a pioneer in the socio-scientific interpretation of African indigenous religion and religions in Africa. This book is to his honour and marks his immense contribution to an emerging field of study and research.

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Preface

Ulrich Berner

It is a pleasure writing a preface to this collective volume published in honour of Jacob Olupona. Space does not allow me to give a comprehensive overview on his contribution to the study of African religions worldwide, with regard to all his publications. Therefore, I shall limit my focus to his contribution to the emergence and development of the study of African religions in my university.

Professor Olupona joined my department at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, for a period of time, about twenty years ago. Although it was rather a short period, his presence had a lasting impact on the development of this department which had been established just a few years earlier. During his stay at Bayreuth University, he was working on a collective volume on *Religion and Society in Nigeria* (1990), co-edited with his colleague Toyin Falola, a historian. This combined an historical perspective with a broad view of the contemporary religious field in Africa. Also at that time he was preparing the publication of his doctoral thesis: *Kingship, Religion and Rituals in a Nigerian Community* (1991). The subtitle of that book—*A Phenomenological Study of the Ondo Yoruba Festivals*—does not reveal the broad range of his methodological approach. He draws on various disciplines, going much beyond traditional phenomenology, as, for instance, by providing descriptions of the kinship system and of economic life—themes that would have been neglected by phenomenology but emphasized in the anthropology and sociology of religion. It is this combination of historical, phenomenological, anthropological, and sociological approaches that has been a model for the study of African religions at the University of Bayreuth.

Jacob was also instrumental in developing his approach to the study of African religions at Bayreuth University, by recommending and sending Nigerian students and scholars to join my department for Ph.D studies and to teach about African religions. Afe Adogame, one of the editors of this book and a former student of Jacob's at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, was the first Nigerian doctoral student in my department. Afe completed his Ph.D. in 1998 and then taught at Lagos for a couple of years before rejoining my university as a teaching and research fellow in 2000. Afe, in turn, recommended Asonzeh Ukah, who completed his Ph.D. in 2004 and has been teaching at Bayreuth, with an emphasis on "religion and the media," since then. Jacob also recommended the late Professor Ogbu Kalu, his former teacher at Nsukka, who spent half a year at Bayreuth as a visiting professor (1999/2000) on an invitation by the Institute of African Studies. I would also like to mention Umar Danfulani from the University of Jos, Nigeria, and Ezra Chitando, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe, one of the editors of

this book, both of whom came to Bayreuth for a period of one year, on Humboldt fellowships. So there is a strong tradition of African scholarship in my department in Germany, resulting from Jacob's activities during his short stay at Bayreuth University, twenty years ago.

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Preface (Ulrich Berner)</i>	xiii

Introduction: African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa <i>Ezra Chitando, Afe Adogame, and Bolaji Bateye</i>	1
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PART I: EMERGING TRENDS IN THE TEACHING OF AFRICAN RELIGIONS

1 African Religions in African Scholarship: A Critique <i>Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani</i>	17
2 Challenges and Prospects of Teaching African Religion in Tertiary Institutions in East Africa <i>Adam K. arap Chepkwony</i>	35
3 Teaching African Traditional Religion at the University of Zimbabwe <i>Tabona Shoko</i>	53
4 Gender and the Teaching of Religious Studies in Nigeria: A Primary Overview <i>Oyeronke Olademo</i>	67
5 Mainstreaming HIV/AIDS in African Religious and Theological Studies <i>Musa W. Dube</i>	77

PART II: INDIGENOUS THOUGHT AND SPIRITUALITY

6 Women, Narrative Traditions, and African Religious Thought <i>Anthonia C. Kalu</i>	95
7 African Spirituality from “Noise, Dust, Darkness and Dancing” <i>Lilian Dube</i>	109

8	Tribes Without Rulers? Indigenous Systems of Governance and Sustainable Rural Development <i>Rose Mary Amenga-Etego</i>	119
9	“Life is Superior to Wealth?”: Indigenous Healers in an African Community, Amasiri, Nigeria <i>Elijah Obinna</i>	135
10	Christianity and the Negotiation of Cultures: A Case Study of Yakurr Festivals in Nigeria <i>Dodeye U. Williams</i>	149
PART III: CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, HINDUISM		
11	“From Prophetism to Pentecostalism”: Religious Innovation in Africa and African Religious Scholarship <i>J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu</i>	161
12	Perceptions of Women’s Health and Rights in Christian New Religious Movements in Kenya <i>Philomena N. Mwaura and Damaris S. Parsitau</i>	175
13	Religion and Divine Presence: Appropriating Christianity from within African Indigenous Religions’ Perspective <i>Victor I. Ezigbo</i>	187
14	African Traditional Religion in the Study of the New Testament in Africa <i>Lovemore Togarasei</i>	205
15	Southern African Islamic Studies Scholarship: A Survey of the “State of the Art” <i>Muhammed Haron</i>	219
16	Folk Beliefs about Spiritual Power and Hinduism in Ghana <i>Albert Kafui Wuaku</i>	239
	<i>Index</i>	259

List of Figures

10.1	A yam harvest	153
10.2	Maidens at the Leboku Festival in Idomi (<i>Picture taken by Elder Akpan, Idomi</i>)	154
10.3	The Procession by the Priest Chiefs Led by the Obol Lupon of Idomi (<i>Picture taken by Elder Akpan, Idomi</i>)	155
10.4	The Okpebili of Idomi (Prime Minister) (<i>Picture taken by Elder Akpan, Idomi</i>)	156
10.5	A Ledu Initiation Ceremony (<i>Picture from the archives of Elder Okoi Obeten, Idomi</i>)	157

Introduction

African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa

Ezra Chitando, Afe Adogame, and Bolaji Bateye

Has the academic study of religion in Africa overcome a failure of nerve and summoned sufficient courage to charter an independent intellectual destiny? Have African scholars of religion been bold enough to shake off the “chains of mental slavery” to proceed to develop “African traditions” in the study of religion in Africa? If African scholars have not yet reached these lofty ideals, have they at least covered appreciable ground in the quest to ensure that the study of religion in Africa is, at least in some important aspects, Africanized? This is critical as the absence of African voices in discourses on Africa is as eloquent as it is regrettable. Mogobe Ramose, a philosopher, protests that there have been too many spokespersons for Africa. According to him, Africans have been reduced to silence, even about themselves. Thus:

It is still necessary to assert and uphold the right of Africans to define the meaning of experience and truth in their own right. In order to achieve this, one of the requirements is Africans should take the opportunity to speak for and about themselves and in that way construct an authentic and truly African discourse about Africa. (Ramose 2003: 1)

The spirit behind Ramose’s assertions above forms the background to this book. The academic study of religion has its roots outside the continent. The very category of religion itself has a European history. According to Timothy Fitzgerald (2000: 4), religion should “be studied as an ideological category, an aspect of modern western ideology, with a specific location in history, including the nineteenth-century period of European colonization.” Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) undertakes an analysis of the “world religions” category, exposing its connection to European conceptions of “the Other.” Although pioneering scholars in the academic study of religion such as Max Müller and James George Frazer were influenced by African Religions in their formulations (Berner 2004), they largely remained faithful to the idea of Europe as the centre of reality.

Overall, the academic study of religion in Africa is an imported product. African scholars of religion are therefore participating in a project that was conceived elsewhere. They are using borrowed tools. Can they format these tools to meet their own needs? Can African scholars ensure that the study of religion in Africa

reflects African issues, concerns and approaches? David Chidester asks some questions that are relevant to the quest to develop African traditions in the study of religion in Africa: "If nineteenth-century comparative religion was fashioned at the intersection of academic discourse and imperial force, has the study of religion subsequently undergone a process of intellectual decolonization? Has it become self-critical of its own interests?" (Chidester 2004: 86).

The process of "intellectual decolonization" is necessarily a difficult one since one of the effects of colonization is to induce self-doubt on the part of the colonial subject (see also wa Thiong'o 1986). An inferiority complex develops in the colonial subject, leading to the desire to mimic the colonial master (see for example, Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel* (Soyinka 1963), and Chisaga in Hove (1988). African creative writers have been keen to critique this state of affairs and to challenge Africans to stand up and be counted. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2003) has written of the need to "move the centre" and challenge Eurocentrism. This is the challenge facing African scholars of religion in postcolonial Africa. Can they assume their own distinctive identity, even as they acknowledge their membership to the global community of scholars of religion? As a few scholars begin to draw attention to the fact that the study of religion is a global enterprise (Alles 2008), how do African scholars want to be represented in this undertaking?

The imprint of European traditions on the study of religion in Africa is obvious (Ludwig and Adogame 2004). The discipline in Africa is heavily indebted to the contributions of various categories of European writers, schools of thought and academic institutions. The study of religion in Africa has been shaped by how individual scholars and institutions in metropolitan centres outside the continent have perceived the discipline. This is an outcome of specific historical processes. However, the post-colonial period requires that African scholars challenge their total dependence on methods and theories developed elsewhere. African scholars of religion must demonstrate innovation and confidence to leave their imprint on the discipline in Africa. Only then will African students readily identify with the study of religion in Africa.

In line with the spirit of decolonization that gripped the continent in the 1960s, most departments of religious studies devoted themselves to the task of addressing African issues. Whereas Christianity had originally enjoyed pride of place in departments/faculties of theology, there was now emphasis on adopting a pluralist approach. In particular, the study of African Traditional Religions (now popularly referred to as African Indigenous Religions) was promoted, as it was felt that these religions offered hope in the project of recovering the lost African identity. African scholars of religion therefore positioned themselves as relevant actors in the struggle for growth and vitality. Decades later, we could ask if they in fact succeeded in generating and upholding "African traditions" in the study of religion in Africa.

Are There “African Traditions” in the Study of Religion in Africa?

Whether or not there are “African traditions” in the study of religion in Africa is a contentious point. The presence of “African traditions” in the study of religion in Africa is a partial reality and, largely, remains an aspiration. It is a partial reality to the extent that there have been appreciable efforts by some African scholars to take African religious realities seriously in their work. Such scholars have sought to give priority to African issues in their research endeavours and to critique the applicability of Western approaches to the study of religion in Africa. However, it remains largely an aspiration because most African scholars have struggled to break free from Euro-American intellectual captivity. In the name of upholding “standards” and “protecting the discipline,” many African scholars have tended to wait for European and American scholars to provide the lead. In most cases, African scholars have embraced methods and theories that have become popular elsewhere, without having the courage to contribute new perspectives to the study of religion.

It is the dependence on conceptual schemes developed elsewhere that has led to calls for Africanization. According to Tinyiko Maluleke (2006: 72), “For theological and religious education this means that conscious, deliberate ideological choices of teaching style, teaching content and personnel must be made if Africanisation is even to begin.” Maluleke is right to insist that there must be an intellectual investment to the project of Africanization. This argument is taken up by the philosopher Kwasi Wiredu in his reflections on decolonizing African philosophy and religion. For Wiredu, decolonization means “divesting African philosophical thinking of all undue influences emanating from our colonial past” (Wiredu 2006: 291). It is therefore vital to promote and nurture “African traditions” in the study of religion in Africa.

The concept “African traditions” is loaded and may give rise to various interpretations. Our use of the term recognizes the diversity of the term “Africa.” As practitioners from various disciplines, including history, political science, philosophy and others have shown, “Africa” is a contested category. It can be deployed to achieve specific objectives. It can be an emotive concept meant to elicit particular responses, as can be witnessed within the political arena. We use it here to refer to the academic study of religion in Anglophone Africa. Other studies are required to do justice to the academic study of religion in other regions within sub-Saharan Africa (specifically, the Francophone and Lusophone regions). By “traditions,” we seek to capture the idea of doing things that has been handed down from one generation to another. Consequently, our reference to “African traditions” in the study of religion in Africa speaks to the specifically African approaches to the study of religion that have developed over the years. Furthermore, we have limited our perspective to departments of religious studies in public universities, though we are mindful of the reality that the study of religion takes place in other centres, including African Studies Institutes, private/church-related faculties of theology and others.

To speak of “African traditions” in the study of religion in Africa is to make a bold statement. For some, the only viable way of studying Africa is through European perspectives on Africa. As Africa is an “invention” (Mudimbe 1988), it is not possible to study it apart from the gaze of those who participated in its “invention.” Furthermore, since the academic study of religion has its origin in Europe, it appears overly ambitious to speak of “African traditions” in this particular discipline. Since when did the “colonial subjects” have the language to speak back? In such a context, it would appear proper to focus on European traditions in the study of religion in Africa as these have held sway over the years.

The challenge of initiating and upholding “African traditions” in the study of religion in Africa can be attributed to a number of factors. First, as indicated in the foregoing section, the discipline has its origin in Europe. This has given the impression that the study of religion can only be legitimate if it follows the model developed in Europe (as well as North America). Many African scholars of religion have upheld the European model of religious studies. Such a development has compromised the emergence of African traditions in the study of religion in Africa. This has seen African scholars continuing to apply methods and theories developed in foreign metropolitan centres, with a limited interrogation of their value in African contexts.

Second, many African scholars of religion have received their advanced training outside the continent. African students who enroll for higher degrees in Europe and North America operate from a position of relative powerlessness. They are exposed to new methods and theories in the study of religion and they generally end up subscribing to some of these methods and theories. To a very large extent, they are not exposed to African scholars and traditions in the study of religion in these foreign shores. Musa Dube, a New Testament scholar from Botswana, provides useful insights into the struggles of an African scholar undertaking graduate studies in North America. She writes:

I travelled for education to the countries of those whose his-stories of travel have marked them down as powerful. I have inscribed them as powerful specialists and marketers of their languages and knowledge. Upon arrival, I was a powerless traveller and guest. Unlike travellers and guests that many Southern African people have encountered, I had no power over my hosts/hostesses. In both cases, I was a student with limited power over the contents and requirements of my programmes. The bulk of what I learnt was wonderful, but did not always have direct relevance to my Southern African context, and most of what I learnt in my own home could not be applicable during the period of my study. (Dube 2000: 154)

Third, even when African scholars undertake their graduate studies in African departments of religious studies, these departments have not prioritized intellectual independence from universities in metropolitan centres. The academic study of religion in Africa continues to defer to external voices. For instance, most course