

Praenotandum; This conference report was published in 2002 in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, 1: 124-127. The page numbers are indicated in the text in bold and between square brackets.

SCRUTINISING EUROPE'S
MENTAL MAPS OF AFRICA, 1500-2000;
A CONFERENCE REPORT

BY

JAN G. PLATVOET

From 4 tot 7 October 2001, forty-four scholars from Europe, Africa and US gathered in *Schloss* Thurnau, the conference centre of Bayreuth University, Germany, to review 'European perceptions of the religions of Africa' in the different academic traditions of Europe from the earliest period of contact till now. Six papers were concerned with aspects of the 'foundational' period of the study of the religions of Africa, roughly 1500-1800. In three of them, by Frieder Ludwig (Bayreuth/München), Robert Debusmann (Bayreuth) and Platvoet glaring differences in the representations of African indigenous religions by 16th and 17th century merchants were discussed as inspired by denominational positions or commercial pragmatism. In three others, Wolbert Smidt (Hamburg), Werner Ustorf (Birmingham), and Jean-Godefroy Bidima (Paris), the part the Enlightenment, in particular Kant and von Herder, played in establishing, or counteracting, the denigrating views of Europe on the native religions of Africa in 18th and 19th centuries was examined.

European perceptions during the missionary and colonial era, roughly 1800-1960, were examined in ten papers. Adam Jones (Leipzig) highlighted the contribution missionary archives, particularly the German ones, had made, and could make, to the historiography of this period. Platvoet described the views of J.Th. van der Kemp (1747-1811) on Xhosa religion. Musa Gaiya (Jos) connected the policies proposed by abolitionist Th.F. Buxton (1786-1844) with the evangelisation of Nigeria's Middle Belt. And Ulrich Berner (Bayreuth) examined the use two founders of the academic study of religions, Max Müller (1823-1900) and James George Frazer (1854-1941), made of African indigenous religions. The fountainheads of modern Protestant and RC liberal approaches to the native religions of Africa, Edwin Smith (1876-1957) and Placide [125] Frans Tempels (1906-1977), were discussed in papers by John Young and Bilo Mubabinge. Holger Stöcker (Berlin) discussed the contributions of Dietrich Westermann (1875-1956) to the study of African languages and religions. Jacob Olupona (Davis) examined the 'tales of two German' authors about Yoruba religion: Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) and (Hans) Ulli Beier. Christopher Steed (Uppsala) discussed the pioneer of research into the AIC-churches, Bengt Sundkler (1909-1993). And Kevin Ward (Leeds) sketched how Max Warren (1904-1977) and John V. Taylor (1914-

2001) caused CMS to shift after 1942 from paternalism to a 'theology of attention' to 'the primal vision' of 'African [indigenous] religion'.

European perceptions of the religions of Africa in the post-colonial period (1960 to now) were reviewed through nine papers examining Islamology, Anthropology (& Sociology), and Migration Studies in as far as these were engaged in the study of religions of Africa, and another nine surveying the contributions particular institutes made to their study.

European perceptions of African Islam were surveyed in papers by Nehemiah Levtzion (Jerusalem) and Rüdinger Seesemann (Bayreuth), while Muslih Yahya (Jos) examined the contribution of J.S. Trimingham to the study of Islam in West Africa, and Mahmud Haggag (Bern/Cairo) reviewed the translations of the Koran into German and their reception in North Africa.

Aspects of modern Anthropology & Sociology of African religions were discussed in papers, or parts of papers, by Elísio Macamo (Bayreuth), Platvoet, Till Förster (Basle), and Henk van Rinsum (Utrecht). Macamo presented reasons why a Sociology of African religions failed to develop. Platvoet pointed to massive influx of Dutch anthropologists into Africa after 1954, when Indonesia refused to admit them; and he examined the research on African indigenous religions by the one Dutch anthropologist who researched African religions before World War II, Sjoerd Hofstra (1898-1983). Förster investigated the different perspectives Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) and Victor Turner (1920-1983) developed on divination in African indigenous religions. And Van Rinsum proposed that the polemic of Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982) in his *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971) against Western Christian and African Christian scholars of African indigenous religions be seen – *avant la lettre* – as an orientalist discourse analysis after the manner of Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

Lastly, Klaus Hock (Rostock) discussed the contribution the youngest discipline in the study of the religions of Africa, Migration (or Diaspora) Studies is making.

[126] In the first of nine papers on institutions, Andrew Walls discussed the work of Geoffrey Parrinder (1910-) at Ibadan from 1949 to 1958. He established two paradigms there, that of Departments of Religious Studies for locating 'academic' (liberal) theology in secular universities, and that of ATR, 'African Traditional Religion'. Jim Cox then examined the institution building work at Aberdeen and Edinburgh of Andrew Walls (1928-) himself and his religiously inspired methodology, which attracted many students from Departments of Religious Studies in African Universities. It was followed by Marc Spindler's survey of the research into the religions of Africa, particularly Islam, at the *Centre d'Étude d'Afrique Noire* (CEAN) at Bordeaux, an independent institute in political science, founded in 1958 and loosely affiliated to the University of Bordeaux. Next came papers by Asonzeh Francis-Kennedy Ukah and Roman Loimeier, both of Bayreuth University. Ukah described the focus of the young University of Bayreuth on Africa and how research into Nigerian Christianity was developed by its Department of *Religionswissenschaft* (the academic study of religions) and into Sahelian and East African Islam by its Islamology Department. Loimeier showed that the young Bayreuth tradition of research into Islam in Africa diverged in fundamental ways from traditional Germanophone Islamology. A most interesting

contribution on African Studies in Greece was presented by Athanasios Papathanasiou (Athens). In addition, Gerhard Grohs (Mainz) described the contribution the World Council of Churches made to the study of religions in Africa by its support of institutions of Christian theology there.

Lastly, papers on the newest institutional developments were presented. Richard Hoskins discussed the recent foundation of a Department of the Study of Religions at Bath Spa University College without 'theological luggage'. Barbara Müller announced that a centre for research into 'past and present interactions between Africans and Europeans in the field of religion' in Africa is about to be founded in the University of Basle. And Carl Sundberg outlined his project on the role of MCCA missionaries in the two Congos between 1880 and 1925 in the new Lund-Copenhagen research project on Scandinavian Colonial History.

The conference was concluded by four papers on the historiography of the religions of Africa in African universities. Afe Adogame (Bayreuth) outlined four periods in the historiography of the religions of West Africa: the missionary one till the 1950s; the cultural nationalist one of the 1950s and 1960s; the interdisciplinary and poly-methodic era of the 1970s; and the retrenchment from the 1980s due to the worsening of the political and economical climate, the grossly inadequate funding of [127] the universities, the internal and external brain drain, and much interesting research collecting dust in inaccessible theses. Grace Wamue (Kenyatta University, Nairobi) likewise pointed to the 'grievously biased [colonial] scholarship', presenting Christianity as light and indigenous religions as darkness. As a result, academic attention remained exclusively directed towards Christianity in Kenya, even though the indigenous and oriental religions, and East African Islam were all included into the syllabus, and had to be taught at all levels of education. Scholars teaching them were completely dependent on European scholarship for data on these religions. This academic subjugation was worsened in the early 1990s when African scholars of religions were caught in a quagmire of economic hardship, retrenchment imposed by World Bank and IMF policy makers who saw no relevance in academic research into religions and the teaching of religion(s) in schools, and brain drain. Similar analyses were given in the papers on the historiography of the religions of Africa in Nigerian universities by Olutayo Adesini (Ibadan), and Umar Danfulani (Jos).

The Bayreuth conference certainly had a few defects: a few papers were more the usual exercises in self-congratulation on past 'achievements' in the study of the religions of Africa than critical analyses of the lenses through which they were perceived and represented; and a few carried theological luggage. But it had many more virtues: its location in the medieval castle of Thurnau; its free, friendly and close, yet critical interaction in and outside the sessions; its outing to Bayreuth with the impressive introduction to Wagner's musical oeuvre and a frank discussion on its use in Nazi time; and the participation of so many members of the AASR, that an important business meeting could be held. But its main achievement was that it constituted the very first attempt at an overview, however incomplete and piecemeal, of five centuries of European imagination of Africa in its most sensitive domain, religions. For this reason, it is likely to constitute a milestone in the history of the study of the religions of Africa.