

Book Reviews



James L. Cox

The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies. Durham: Acumen, 2014, x + 182 pp., 978 1 84465 754 4, \$76.86 (hard cover); 978 1 84465 755 1, \$24.05 (soft cover).

The Invention of Tradition (1983) by Hobsbawn and Ranger has been the fountainhead of a rich river of research. This book is also inspired by it (pp. 6-9, 143-144). It investigates the invention of the tradition, widespread in Africa and elsewhere in the twentieth century, that a Creator God like the Christian God had always been the central belief notion, and to a degree an object of worship in indigenous religions in precolonial times. By taking this 'invention of God' as his object of study, Cox joins another important albeit tiny research tradition in the study of the indigenous religions of Africa, that was initiated by the Ugandan scholar of African indigenous religions Okot p'Bitek (1-2, 9, 161). In his *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1972) he blasted his teachers in anthropology at Oxford and African theologians alike for Hellenizing and Christianizing the God of the indigenous religions of Africa, as did John Mbiti in his *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970) by endowing God in over 300 indigenous religions in Africa with all the metaphysical trappings Christians theologians had invented over the course of centuries for their biblical God. Although Cox examines but one African case, that of Mwari in the Shona religion in Zimbabwe, this book is a must for African and Western scholars researching and/or teaching about indigenous religions of Africa, and in particular about the histories of indigenous belief notions about God from earliest contact with Christian beliefs till now.

The book is essential for two reasons. One is that the book is an exercise in global comparison. Cox carefully examines four case histories, from earliest contact time till now, of the Westernization, c.q. Christianization, of presumed indigenous God notions as widespread as in New Zealand, Australia, Zimbabwe, and Alaska. He demonstrates that all four have a very distinct history. Although they have in common that Western, c.q. Christian traits were imputed to a presumed indigenous high god in all four, and though such

imputations have occurred and continue to occur worldwide, Cox insists that for reasons of methodology they must be studied as place-, time-, and context-bound singularities in their own right rather than be subjected to the scissor-and-paste, de-contextualizing and Christianizing approach of, for example, Mbiti (2, 9). The four case histories outlined are that of Io in Maori religion in New Zealand (35-66, 138-139); Mwari in Shona religion in Zimbabwe (67-88, 139-140); the Rainbow Serpent in Australian Aboriginal Religion (89-111, 141-142); and Elam Yua in Yupiit ('Eskimo/Inuit') religion in southwest Alaska (113-135, 142-143).

In Zimbabwe all Christian churches now identify Mwari with the Christian God, and the Christian God with Mwari (2, 66-69). Cox exposes this 'theological invention' (69) by first tracing the northern (Korekore/Zezuru) and southern (Rozvi) Shona traditions about Mwari (70-75). He agrees with Beach and Aschwanden that in precontact times Mwari was regarded as a combination of a sky and fertility god and ancestral spirit and was closely associated with rain (73-74, 79-80, 82-83, 87, 139-140), rather than as a Creator God. Cox then discusses the Christianizing views of Canaan Banana, a Methodist minister and the first President of Zimbabwe from 1980 to 1987 (75-81); those of modern Zimbabwean biblical scholars proposing Shona etymologies of Mwari (81-82); and the developments in RC views in Zimbabwe in which the Jesuits opted for Mwari as identical with God only at the time of Vatican II (83-87).

The other reason why I commend this book is that Cox provides an additional toolkit for studying inventions of traditions (9, 144-161). He suggests that we may analyse them, in postcolonial fashion, as cultural hybridizations, either of the organic / unintentional / unconscious / mute / opaque kind, or of the intentional / conscious / contestatory kind, the latter an oblique strategy of the oppressed reversing oppression by adopting it: 'in our case: the appropriation of the Christian God as an indigenous deity' (146, 144-147). Applying them to Mwari as Creator God, Cox discerns intentional hybridization with Canaan Banana, political activists, and indigenous theologians (149-150), and organic hybridization with the generality of Shona Christians (148-149).

I offer three comments in conclusion. One respects Cox's confidence that 'religion is always a communal and social affair: [it] can never be . . . an entirely isolated experience' (5). I fear that the universal validity of this Durkheimian assertion is being disproved by the most recent developments in mankind's religious history. Second, contestatory hybridization is analytically helpful, but unintentional hybridization seems to shed little extra light. Lastly, this volume inevitably organizes the case histories into a rather rigid opposition between God in indigenous religions in precontact time, before they were exposed to the full force of Christian missions through schools and in other ways and

twentieth-century indigenous Christian communities 'inventing' that precontact indigenous notion of God. I suggest we need additional long-term studies of what subtle shifts had already occurred in the belief about God in precontact African indigenous religions due to, for example, contact for centuries with Christian and/or Muslim traders and their notions of God. Indigenous religions being adoptive and adaptive, notions foreign to Mwari as sky/rain/fertility god may have already been haphazardly added, laying the groundwork for his rapid transformation in early contact time from sky god to Creator God in heaven in the heads of Shona, 'pagan' and convert. Such outcomes will further exculpate unintentional hybridizations, but their virtue will be that they provide us with dynamic, complex histories of how in some African indigenous religions God was transformed over time from a sky god, who was not represented as a creator, to the Creator God in heaven after the biblical model.

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