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FROM OBJECT TO SUBJECT: A HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF THE RELIGIONS OF AFRICA

Summary

The history of the study of the religions of (sub-Saharan) Africa may be divided into two, partly overlapping, phases: 'Africa as object', when its religions were studied virtually exclusively by scholars and other observers from outside Africa; and 'Africa as subject' of the study of its religions, when the religions of Africa had begun to be studied also, and increasingly mainly, by African scholars. My article has, therefore, two main sections. In the first section, on Africa as object, I outline the development of the study of African traditional/indigenous religions, in chronological order, in three phases: that from trader to academic anthropologist; that by missionaries of liberal theological persuasion; and the recent studies of African traditional religions by historians. In the second section, on Africa as subject – or author – of the study of the religions of Africa, I follow the same order. I deal first with examples of studies of African traditional religions by African amateur and professional anthropologists; then by African Christian scholars in Departments of Religious Studies; and by African historians. 'Africa as subject' of the study of the religions of Africa is what this book is about. In this section I will, therefore, confine myself to only a few paradigmatic examples from its history to show how also in Africa itself, the study of its religions developed from amateur ethnography into their study in basically three distinct academic disciplines: anthropology, religious studies, and history.

The history of the study of the religions of (sub-Saharan) Africa may be divided into two, partly overlapping, phases: 'Africa as object', when its religions were studied virtually exclusively by scholars, and other observers, from outside Africa; and 'Africa as subject' of the study of its religions, when the religions of Africa had begun to be studied also, and increasingly mainly, by African scholars.¹ As it is not possible to deal with the history of the study of all the thirteen categories of religions which I outline in my other contribution to this book because of the limitations of space, time, and of my knowledge of this vast field, I will present a paradigmatic outline of the history of the study of the religions of (sub-Saharan) Africa and restrict myself mainly to the history of the study of one of the categories outlined above, that of

¹ These two categories are problematic, as are all outsider-insider distinctions, as Bourdillon correctly contends in this volume (Bourdillon 1996: 140-141). For example, I place missionaries in the outsider category, though they usually were, or are, long time residents in an African colony or nation, spoke/speak the vernacular(s) fluently, and are in some respects highly indigenized; but in others not. On the other hand, I take all scholars posted in a university in Africa as insiders, though as scholars – the black African scholars not excluded –, they are very much westernized through their education in universities modelled on, and initially supervised by, metropolitan universities (cf. Platvoet 1989).

the traditional religions of Africa,² and even there, to mainly examples from my own fields of research, the history of the study of Akan traditional religion, and the history of the study of African traditional religions by British and African social anthropologists,³ missionaries of various denominations and theological persuasions, and African Christian theologians. I present them as exemplary, not only of the study of the – unfortunately only few – African traditional religions which have been researched by one or more scholars and therefore have a history of their study; but also as more or less paradigmatic of how the study of the other categories of the religions of Africa developed. The model I present is based admittedly on only a tiny selection of the historical data. Moreover, it is based on two assumptions that must be tested by further research. The model I present assumes firstly, that all the categories of the religions of Africa which I have outlined above were studied by outsiders before they began to be studied by African scholars; and secondly, that both the outsider and insider phases started virtually from scratch, from amateur ethnography and history of often very poor quality, to become more rigorous and academic in the later phases.

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AFRICA AS OBJECT

In this first section, on Africa as object, I outline the development of the study of African traditional religions, in chronological order, in three phases: first that from trader to academic anthropologist; then that by missionaries of liberal theological persuasion; and finally with the recent historical studies of African traditional religions.

Amateur ethnography

The study of the religions of Africa by outsiders began, in retrospect, in very defective and biased ways, in the reports by traders, slavers, travellers, missionaries, military men, colonial administrators, etc., from the Muslim world (including Muslim Africa⁴), and from Europe, about the customs and traditions of the African societies which they happened to visit, or to live in for a period of time. Their descriptions of African societies were always very partial – in both senses of this adjective –, particularly in respect of religions of African societies.⁵ Yet, despite glaring faults, they are, if they are submitted to proper source criticism,⁶ often of great value

² I would now rather term them the indigenous religions of Africa, because 'traditional' is too readily equated with 'static', thereby misrepresenting the receptive and adaptive qualities of African indigenous religions as dynamic historical events.

³ I ignore the important differences between the various 'national anthropologies'; cf. on them, Gerholm & Hanertz 1982: 15-21; Westerlund 1993: 47-52.

⁴ Cf. Clarke (1990: 211-216) for a survey for the very many source materials in Arabic, Hausa and other indigenous African languages which have been collected and published in the last five decades for the study of the history of African Islam, and of African Muslim and non-Muslim communities and regions.

⁵ Cf. Mudimbe 1988; Baum 1990; Lewis 1990; Shaw 1990a, 1990b; Murphy 1990, Chidester 1996 for the highly biased images of African indigenous religions as primitive superstition, rife with bloody sacrifices, human sacrifice, evil witchcraft, black magic, juju, fetishism, voodoo, cannibalism, created by Muslim traders and scholars and traders and missionaries from Europe from the 15th century onwards when they began to explore sub-Saharan Africa for trade and mission. The prejudiced views of African indigenous religions which Europeans broadcasted served important ideological, political, commercial and psychological functions for Western colonial and missionary expansion and had baneful effects on the scholarly research of African indigenous religions. These biased views of African indigenous religions also shaped the comparative study of religions both in metropolitan Europe and in its colonies, in particular in Southern Africa in the (late) 19th century (cf. Chidester 1996).

⁶ Cf. Westerlund 1993: 57-59

for our historical knowledge of African societies and religions, because they unwittingly reported many valuable details that would otherwise have been irretrievably lost. Some of these amateur ethnographers proved more trustworthy than others. Ibn Battuta is an example of a reliable Arab traveller who reported extensively on the development of Islamic learning in the Sahelian towns of Walata, Timbuktu, and Takedda which he visited during his travels in the Sahel between 1352 and 1354.⁷ Another example is Willem Bosman's extensive and indeed often accurate description of the 'religion, idolatry, and superstition' of the Akan and Guan societies on the Gold Coast as he observed them between 1688 and 1702 when he served as a factor⁸ in Elmina castle.⁹

[107] Other important information came from diplomats residing for some time at the courts of African kings for the purpose of negotiating treaties, like Bowditch who stayed five months at the *Asantehene's* court in Kumasi in 1817, and Dupuis who was there for three months in 1820.¹⁰ Likewise, despite their pietist, exclusivist theology, missionaries in the 19th century produced much valuable material on the traditional religions,¹¹ in particular those to whom the study of local languages had been assigned for the purpose of translating the Bible. A fine example is the Basle Mission linguistic scholar Johann Gottlieb Christaller (1827-1895) who discovered already in the 1860s by his intensive studies of the Akan languages, that Akan traditional religion was monotheistic¹² despite – or better: in addition to – its manifest 'polytheism' and the prominent cult of ancestors, in particular that of the (many) 'royal' ones.¹³ Some of the officers, engaged in the military campaigns by which colonial rule was established over Africa between 1870 and 1890, were also keen amateur ethnographers. One was Ellis who produced several ethnographies on West African coastal societies, one of which was on the Akan.¹⁴

⁷ Hiskett 1984: 40, 76

⁸ I.e. as a merchant in the service of a chartered company who traded on its behalf.

⁹ Bosman 1704, 1967. Books like those of Bosman were avidly and widely read. *E.g.* Bosman's book had several Dutch editions (1704, 1709, 1719, 1737), and was translated in English (1705, 1721, 1907), French (1705), German (1706) and Italian (1752-1754). There was such a good market for books on the wider world, that industrious compilers, themselves usually librarians, made voluminous compilations (e.g. Dapper 1668 on Africa), thereby making the less accessible reports available to the wider public. The originals as well as the compilations became important sources for the earliest students of comparative religion, such as de Brosses (1756¹, 1982²), who established the category 'fetishism' as the earliest and lowest form of religion of man on the basis of these earliest, highly prejudiced descriptions of the traditional religions of West African societies.

¹⁰ Bowditch 1966; Dupuis 1966

¹¹ Most of it is still hidden in the archives of missionary organisations and in the mission periodicals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Provided they are submitted to proper source criticism, they contain very valuable material for the construction of the histories of specific African traditional religions; cf. Westerlund 1993: 53-59; for two examples of such historical studies, cf. also Platvoet 1985, 1991.

¹² 'The heathen negroes are, at least to a great extent, rather monotheists, as they apply the term for *God* only to one supreme being' (Christaller 1933: 356; his italics).

¹³ The traditional labels, 'monotheism', 'polytheism', and 'pantheism' sit very poorly with Akan, and many other African, traditional religions. Idowu's 'diffusive monotheism', Evans-Pritchard's 'refraction' of God into the lower spirits, and the view, fashionable among Christian students of Bantu religions that ancestors are merely, or primarily, intermediaries between the traditional believers and God, cannot be squared with Akan data about the gods, the ancestors, the charms, etc., all of whom are addressed as independent and final agents in their relations with men. However, provided that this very patent polytheism is safeguarded, one may, at the level of the conceptual representation of the very loose articulation of the several departments of Akan traditional religion, term it a form of 'inclusive monotheism' without departing too far from Akan religion as perceived and practised by the Akan themselves, because God serves in their religions as the all-embracing backdrop, and is usually addressed as such briefly in the opening phase of a rite for gods, ancestors, or some other meta-empirical entity. It is not incorrect to say that Akan traditional religion is at once mono-, poly-, and pan-theistic, and none of these. Cf. also Shaw 1990a: 347-349; and Platvoet (2012) on the history of Akan notions of 'God'.

¹⁴ Ellis 1970. On this early phase in the history of the study of Yoruba traditional religion, cf. Olupona 1993: 241-243.

On the basis of these 19th century descriptions, the Roman Catholic missionary priest Noel Baudin attempted the first general representation of ‘the traditional religion’ [108] of Africa south of the Sahara in 1885. He stated that ‘the idea of God is fundamental’ in them, but that they were ‘practically only a vast pantheism [...] and deeply imbued with polytheism’.¹⁵

Towards academic anthropology

While amateur ethnography continued to contribute in ways both modest and immodest,¹⁶ a more scholarly approach to the study of traditional societies and religions, began to emerge in the first decades of the 20th century, because colonial governments in Africa felt a need, for various reasons, of more reliable information on the traditional societies which they governed. From 1908 onwards they began to appoint ‘government anthropologists’ to supply them with that information.¹⁷ They allotted these posts at first mainly to suitable political officers in their own service. The best example of this category is R.S. Rattray, who possessed a gift, rare among whites, of polyglotism,¹⁸ and a passion for ethnography.¹⁹ He was appointed in January 1921 and served as Government Anthropologist till his retirement from colonial service in January 1931. Rattray was, however, also appointed because one wished to sidetrack him. In the eyes of his colleagues he was unfit for a top post in the colonial administration of the Gold Coast Colony, because he had ‘a penchant for going native’.²⁰ Being moreover (too much of an) ‘Asante-phile’, he argued strongly²¹ for a much greater autonomy for the traditional rulers in the setting of the ‘Dual Mandate’ or ‘Indirect Rule’, by which the British governed their colonies, than the colonial government was willing to allow. He also was in favour of a curb on modernizing and Christian influences.²² Rattray’s books on Asante society²³ have become classics despite, or perhaps because, they are purely descriptive, a-theoretical inventories of Akan culture.²⁴

¹⁵ Baudin (1885: 9) as quoted in Idowu 1973: 140

¹⁶ Eva Meyerowitz’s publications on Akan religion and culture are an example of the immodest, in this case, hyper-diffusionist type. She traces them back all the way to prehistoric Egypt. Cf. e.g. Meyerowitz 1951; for a critique, cf. Warren 1970.

¹⁷ On the history of this institution, cf. Kuper 1975: 127-130

¹⁸ It was not rare among (illiterate) Africans, who often spoke several local languages, and in addition a lingua franca, such as Hausa, and had some command of the colonial language.

¹⁹ Before his appointment in 1920, he had already published three ethnographical books (Rattray 1907, 1913, 1916). Moreover, living a bachelor’s life, he had spent his furloughs in England in 1909, 1910-1911, 1912, and 1914 at the University of Oxford, attending R.R. Marett’s classes on Anthropology and obtaining a Diploma in Anthropology in 1914. However, he found no trace of Marett’s animatism among the Akan (Platvoet 1982a: 58).

²⁰ When anthropologists began to do ‘fieldwork’ in the 1930s and 1940s, they were often also seen as having ‘gone native’ and were distrusted for that reason by white administrators and settlers (Kuper 1975: 140-141, 149).

²¹ Rattray was known among the Akan as *Amoako*, ‘red pepper’, both because of his strong views and his red hair (von Laue 1976: 34); cf. however Platvoet 1982a: 241 on this folk etymology.

²² Cf. Platvoet 1982a: 57-60.

²³ Rattray 1916, 1923, 1927, 1929, 1930.

²⁴ Rattray was a ‘survey anthropologist’ who travelled with his specially equipped van from one government guest house to another with his African servants. He rarely stayed in any one place for more than a couple of weeks and did not aim at in-depth descriptions of the society, culture and religion of a specific Akan state, town, or village, as later anthropologists did by their ‘fieldwork’ methods of participant observation. Moreover, his relations were mainly with Akan ‘royals’: kings, ‘queen-mothers’, and the members of their courts. Thirdly, though sidetracked, Rattray held a high rank in the colonial administration and was clearly perceived as the representative of the colonial government and as the superior of Akan royals when he conducted his research among them. Certain distortions of e.g. historical developments inevitably followed. Cf. von Laue 1976; Platvoet 1982a: 57-68; Platvoet 1991.

[109] In the late 1920s, colonial governments began to use academic anthropologists in addition to, or instead of, government anthropologists. The first were selected from the pupils of Seligman and Malinowski at the London School of Economics (LSE). They had been trained in the new method of 'fieldwork' by participant observation during a prolonged stay with one particular group in which the ethnographer also learned to speak the language of that community. Though these academic anthropologists held no post in the civil service of a colony, they 'worked on behalf of the Government and mainly at their expense'.²⁵ In addition, they were given many facilities and much support by all levels of the colonial administration, and received hospitality from both the civil servants and the missionaries. The most prominent example of this academic anthropologist in temporary colonial service is Evans-Pritchard. He was invited by the government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan²⁶ in 1926 to research the Azande,²⁷ and in 1930 urgently requested by it 'to report on an unruly Nilotic tribe', the Nuer, briefly after they had been 'most brutally pacified' by force of arms.²⁸ Between his 'expeditions' into their territory for his twenty months of fieldwork from 1932 to 1934,²⁹ he taught sociology in the Faud I University, at Cairo, Egypt.³⁰ In addition, the Government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan contributed the substantial sum of £200 towards the publication of his book on the Azande, and 'generously' to his publications on the Nuer.³¹

In addition to academic anthropologists being taken into paid temporary service by single colonial governments, in 1928 a central 'clearing house' between the academic study of African languages, societies, cultures, and religions in the universities of Europe and the British, French and Belgian colonial governments was established in London: the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures. Three former Governors of major African colonies, Lugard of Nigeria, Julien of French West Africa, and van der Kerken of the Belgian Congo, sat on its Executive, which was [110] chaired by Lugard.³² Moreover, in 1938 the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute was founded in Northern Rhodesia as the first colonial research institute for British Central Africa. After 1945, several others followed.³³ The liaison between academic anthropology and the administration of the colonies thus continued to be a close one till the very end of the colonial era.³⁴

Precisely because of the colonial needs, the study of African traditional societies and religions by anthropologists expanded greatly till 1960, and improved in academic quality, be it

²⁵ Evans-Pritchard 1937: VII-VIII

²⁶ Before him it had contracted one of his other teachers at LSE, Seligman, for ethnographic survey work (cf. Kuper 1975: 18, 20, 107, 128; Burton 1992: 27, 37-38) from 1909 to 1912, and from 1921 to 1922 (cf. Seligman & Seligman 1932).

²⁷ Burton 1992: 20, 39-43, 46, 48

²⁸ Kuper 1975: 136; Douglas 1980: 43; Burton 1992: 42-48

²⁹ Douglas 1980: 41-45. Burton (1992: 44), however, holds that his fieldwork among the Nuer totals to 'about 10 1/2 months'.

³⁰ Evans-Pritchard had done some intermittent teaching at LSE between 1929 and 1932 without holding a post in it (Burton 1992: 20).

³¹ Evans-Pritchard 1937: VII; 1971¹⁰: VII; cf. also Burton 1992: 40-42, 48. For other anthropologists in government service, such as Schapera in that of the government of Bechuanaland, now Botswana, cf. Kuper 1975: 127-129, 137-139.

³² Cf. Lugard 1928; cf. also Kuper 1975: 130-133

³³ Such as the East African Institute of Social Research (Kuper 1975: 133, 139, 143)

³⁴ Cf. e.g. Wagner 1949: V-VI; Kuper 1975: 123-149, esp. 142-143. Cf. also Gerholm & Hannertz 1982: 7, 10-11, on anthropology as specifically a European science, constituted by the British, French, Belgians, and Dutch having large colonies (and the Americans and Russians having their internal colonies of native 'Red Indians' and Siberian, Mongolian, and other Asiatic peoples).

within the limits set by paradigmatic perceptions and theoretical models congenial to the pragmatics of the European colonial empires. They were the a-historical functionalism of Durkheim, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and the traditionalising use of the 'ethnographic present', which fixed, or rather 'froze', African 'traditional societies' – and their religions – synchronically as static phenomena. Thus they made them appear as well-integrated, clearly bounded, fairly static structures or organisms, set in an hypothetical and idealised moment 'x', in late pre-colonial or early colonial times. They represented them as undisturbed by colonialism and modernization, or intimated that their integration and balance were being severely disturbed by modernization, and that their very existence was being threatened by the 'modernization' into which they had been thrown by colonialism.³⁵ Those pictures served not only academic purposes, of ethnographic description, comparative analysis, and theory development along functionalist and other lines; but also those of the colonial administrator, judge, magistrate, and educator, who needed to get, in Lugard's words, 'a thorough grasp on the African mind' in matters of land tenure, customary law, moral conceptions, and 'draw out what was there [instead of] simply to try to cram something in from the outside' in the process of education and modernisation. In Lugard's view, they even served the purpose of the trader, for he needed to know also 'the consequences of modernisation on the consumer demands of the natives'.³⁶

The absence of the diachronic perspective from functionalist analyses of African traditional societies – and religions –, which would have brought out the dynamic adaptation to change that was actually taking place, and the emphasis on them as distinct and bounded societies – and religions –, was in a curious way congenial to colonialist views of African societies as an indistinct mass of numerous, generally small, backward groups. They were seen as the congeries of 'primitive tribes', which were in need of the Western master to establish (the colonial) order among them, restore to them their identity, and chart out for them the road to 'development'.³⁷ This [111] static and segregating approach has been abandoned in much recent anthropology.³⁸ Its focus is more often on change and exchange in plural and pluralist societies, and on the dynamic processes of cultural, social, and religious transformation as they occurred in the past and present. Many anthropologists adopt a historical perspective as at least part of their kit of analytical tools.³⁹ Cooperation with historians has markedly increased, as will be shown below.

The contribution of liberal Christian missionaries

³⁵ Cf. Kuper 1975: 132, 141-142, 146; Ranger 1988: 865; Shaw 1990b: 186-187; Burton 1992: 42

³⁶ Lugard 1928: 2-3, 11

³⁷ Cf. Mudimbe (1988: 1-5) on the colonial construction as the marginalisation of African traditional societies, and the trivialization of their cultures and religions. Kuper (1975: 123-149) is, of course, right to insist that the ahistoric functionalist romanticism of academic anthropology delivered very little that was useful to the colonial administrators in the day to day running of a district or a colony. So is Burton (1992: 49-52) when he notes that 'Evans-Pritchard was aware of the moral and political ambiguities of fieldwork', and that his anthropology was not 'a handmaiden of colonialism'. The mechanisms of colonialist conceptual conquest and language imperialism, uncovered by Mudimbe, operate at a different level: that of the cultural conditioning of scholarly concepts and theories. They are subtly at work even now in the service of Western post-colonial economic hegemony, as is shown by Lewis (1990: 313-314); and unsubtly in the modern fictional representations of African-derived religions as 'black magic' ('voodoo'), supported by, and recognizable to, Western mass audiences (Murphy 1990: 323-324).

³⁸ It has, however, continued to be much in vogue in surveys of 'the religions of the world' till even the last decade (cf. Lewis 1990).

³⁹ Cf. e.g. the essays in historical anthropology in Anderson & Johnson 1991, 1995

In the closing decades of the colonial era, another important outsider perception emerged: that of white, academic missionaries who had left, or were leaving, behind the orthodox, exclusivist theology of religions of the first generations of missionaries for the new inclusivist views of liberal theology. These views had been gaining ground in a few centres of Protestant academic Christian theology in universities in Europe and North America in the course of the nineteenth century. They had provided the theological bases for the historical-critical study of the Bible as a literary document – instead of it being regarded as the pure and unalloyed ‘Word of God’ –, and for the historical and comparative study of the (other) religions of mankind, as initiated by Max Müller in Oxford, and C.P. Tiele in Leiden. By degrees and stages,⁴⁰ these liberal, or ‘modern[ist]’, theologies were adopted also into the ‘confessional’, or church-tied, theologies⁴¹ of the mainline Protestant churches in the first half of the twentieth century, and, after 1950, into the R.C. theology. These dropped the *verafalsa religio* dichotomy of traditional Christian orthodoxy, and postulated on [112] various theological grounds⁴² that the non-Christian religions were proper religions, permitted, or even ordained, by God, and with at least some function in the divine economy, and some salvific efficacy. Therefore, they may, or must, be respected, studied, and encountered as communities of co-believers of a different religiosity.

Early products of this new missionary approach were the descriptions of specific traditional religions of Africa by missionaries living among a certain ethnic group and endowed, not only with liberal views, but also, like Rattray, with a gift for languages, a passion for ethnography, a deep respect for African cultures and religions, and an equally deep concern for their adaptation to, and integration in, the new contexts.⁴³ Examples are Junod’s 1927 Thonga ethnography,⁴⁴ Willoughby’s study of Bantu ‘magico-religious practices and beliefs’,⁴⁵ Smith (& Dale)’s ethnography of the Ba-ila,⁴⁶ Schebesta’s studies of the Bambuti pygmies,⁴⁷ Tempels’

⁴⁰ E.g. that of a theology of ‘accommodation’, of a ‘native’ Church to its ‘pagan’ environment. The first Ecumenical conference of missions, held in Edinburgh, in 1910, played an important role in disseminating liberal views, both among missionaries and in the churches which they represented.

⁴¹ Cf. Platvoet 1998a, 1998b, 2002 on the distinction between academic and confessional Christian theology. Its usefulness varies with the particular state-church relationships obtaining in Europe (and elsewhere) in the last two centuries and the forms of institutionalisation of theology derived from them.

⁴² Such as perceiving the ‘pagan’ religions as the ‘seed words’ (*logoi spermatikoi*) from which Christianity might spring, or as ‘preparation of the gospel’ (*praeparatio evangelica*) in some manner, or postulating some other continuity between the ‘pagan’ religions and the ‘true’ religion. Others either assumed that all the religions of man proceeded from a faculty common to all men: a ‘sense of divinity fixed into their very bowels and inwards’ by God at creation (*sensus divinitatis in ipsis medullis et visceribus infixus*); or from Schleiermacher’s *Sinn und Geschmack für das Unendliche* (‘sense and taste for the infinite’), or Max Müller’s perception of the Infinite in the finite, or held still other postulates that ‘prove’ man is ‘by nature religious’ (*homo religiosus*). Such postulates inform the ‘religionist’ – religiously inspired – academic study of religions.

⁴³ On their ‘theology of continuity’, cf. Westerlund 1985: 50-52

⁴⁴ Junod (1927²: 8-9): ‘amidst darkness and sin, the heathen mind is often seeking light and righteousness, and these rays of truths, these presentiments of a higher life, must infinitely be respected and utilised in the preaching of the Gospel of Christ’. Junod explicitly refers to the 1910 Edinburgh Conference as his inspiration for this theology.

⁴⁵ Willoughby 1928; cf. Westerlund 1985: 51

⁴⁶ Smith & Dale 1968². Smith follows Williams James in postulating that religion is ‘primarily a matter of emotion’, and ‘an impulse to enter into mystical communication with the Being whose existence is felt in the world around them’ by men. It is ‘an inner fact’ which consists ‘everywhere, and in all its stages, in the consciousness which individuals have of an intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel related’. The Ba-ila had such a consciousness and therefore have a religion (Smith & Dale 1968, II: 80, 207). Cf. Smith (1966a: 12) also about how ‘grossly wrong’ it was to equate African traditional religions with pagan ignorance; and Smith (1927: 260) on the ‘naturalisation’ of Christianity in Africa by presenting it, ‘not in antagonism to, but as the fulfilment of their aspirations’.

⁴⁷ E.g. Schebesta 1933: 160, 166; cf. also Dupré 1975; Westerlund 1993: 51-52.

neo-Thomistic *La philosophie bantoue*,⁴⁸ and the volume on African ideas of God edited by Smith.⁴⁹

[113] Most of these Western missionaries were well-trained, in theology as well as in some type of European philosophy. It gave them a frame of mind with a strong bent towards articulation, doctrinal systematisation and generalisation of beliefs and other cultural concepts. They readily extrapolated from the particular to the universal, as e.g. Tempels did from Luba folk wisdom to Bantu worldview. But not only did they universalise the particular, they also ‘upgraded’ the pre-reflective, ‘multi-stranded’,⁵⁰ inarticulate, or very loosely articulated, and highly dispersed patterns of thought and beliefs of traditional African societies – which emerged into the actors’ consciousness usually only when activated by a particular situation –, into well-articulated, readily available, systems of reflective thought and seemingly consciously held beliefs. In brief, they strongly westernized and christianized African thought patterns and religions after the model of the systematic European philosophies and theologies; that is, they shaped the indigenous religions of Africa after the ‘Judaeo-Christian template’ of their own religion by representing them with the help of categories and structures derived from (the study of) the Biblical religions.⁵¹ They also constructed an a-historic, romantic view of the African ‘traditional religions’ (ATRs), as part and parcel of past static, stable, well-integrated societies.⁵² This unifying and ameliorative mode of perception became the accepted paradigm of academic research into ‘ATR’, the unified ‘African traditional religion’ by academic theologians when, from 1948 onwards, the earliest university colleges were founded,⁵³ and Departments of Divinity, or Theology, and a Department of Religious Studies in Ibadan – the first ever anywhere in the world –, were established in the Anglophone ones, and a full-blown RC Faculty of Theology in the Lovanium University in the Belgian Congo.⁵⁴

The father of the unifying model in Anglophone ‘Religious Studies’ was Parrinder, who became a lecturer at Ibadan in 1949. He collated from earlier ethnographies the elements⁵⁵ which the religions of the Yoruba, Ewe, Akan, ‘and kindred peoples’, had (more or less) in common into ‘West African religion’ in 1949 in order to [114] present ‘the nature of the chief

⁴⁸ Tempels 1945. The Dutch original was published in 1946. Translations into German and English appeared in 1956 and 1959 respectively. Tempels presented, of course, no philosophy in the usual meaning of the word, but ‘a mixture of traditional religion and pre-reflective folk wisdom’. Moreover, his aim was pastoral and pedagogical, not theoretical (cf. Hoh 1966; Westerlund 1985: 75-86).

⁴⁹ Smith 1966b³ (1950¹)

⁵⁰ Cf. Gellner 1988: 45, 54, 59

⁵¹ Shaw 1990a: 343; 1990b: 182-183; cf. also p'Bitek 1971 and Horton 1984.

⁵² As in the functionalist ethnographies of colonial anthropology; cf. Ranger 1988: 866.

⁵³ At Achimota in the Gold Coast in 1948; Makerere in Uganda, Ibadan in Nigeria, and the R.C. *Université Lovanium* in the Belgian Congo in 1949; Monrovia in Liberia in 1951; Salisbury in the Rhodesias in 1955; Nairobi in 1956; Dakar in Senegal in 1957; Abidjan in the Ivory Coast in 1958; Bujumbura in Burundi in 1960; etc. All these ‘university colleges’ were affiliated to, and strictly supervised by, a metropolitan university. Cf. Platvoet 1989: 109-110

⁵⁴ Cf. Platvoet 1989: 110-115

⁵⁵ Westerlund (1985: 18) terms the collations of Parrinder ‘a comparative or phenomenological study’. The latter adjective seems inappropriate, unless ‘phenomenological’ is used retrospectively and merely as a synonym of ‘comparative’; or to refer to the ‘religionism’ which Parrinder shared with the ‘phenomenologists’. Parrinder seems not to have been aware, in the twenty-four years (1931-1955) he spent in West Africa, of developments in the Phenomenology of Religion, which was very much a Continental affair till 1956, when Eliade exported his variety of it to the Anglo-Saxon world (under the misleading name of ‘History of Religions’!). On Parrinder’s first eighteen years (1931-1949) in West Africa and the genesis of his *West African Religion* (Parrinder’s Ph.D. thesis for London University in 1945, examined by E.W. Smith!), cf. Parrinder 1989.

beliefs and practices of these deeply religious peoples'.⁵⁶ Then he proceeded to use more ethnographies to construct 'African traditional religion' (ATR) in 1954 along the same lines.⁵⁷ And finally, he seemed to put the latter on a par with Christianity and Islam in his *Africa's Three Religions*.⁵⁸

'West African religion' and 'African traditional religion', however, were used by Parrinder as unifying *concepts*: categories established for intellectual, didactic, and, ultimately, theological purposes. He did not present them as historical realities. He argued from their historical multiplicity to an abstract unity among them, which he produced despite his being aware of their very many 'regional differences'. And he warned that these differences must be duly noted. Part One of *Africa's Three Religions* he therefore entitled 'traditional religions', not 'traditional religion'. The major difficulty which one faced in their study, he wrote, was their 'lack of a central tradition', as Christianity and Islam possess.⁵⁹

Parrinder's comparative approach, however, emphasized much more what African traditional religions had in common than how they differed, thereby homogenizing them. It stressed their beliefs in the supreme being, gods, ancestors, their philosophy and cosmology much more than their rituals, and thereby intellectualised them. And it put an emphasis on what they had in common with Christianity and other 'major religions': their prayers to God, other prayers, sacrifices, 'sacred' people and 'sacred' places; and how their beliefs were activated in 'the cycle of life', thereby shaping them after the 'Judaean-Christian template'.⁶⁰ In brief, Parrinder presented 'African traditional religion' in the a-historical, de-contextualized manner in which Christian theologians usually present 'Christian doctrine'.⁶¹ Thereby he cut it loose from where it was at home and functioned in diffused and submerged ways without any doctrinal or moral pretences: in the many departments of traditional and modernizing life of traditional believers and most Christians and Muslims. His approach was a de-contextualising one despite the title, 'The social group', of part three of *African [115] Traditional Religion*.⁶² His unifying concepts thus prepared the way for the unitary 'ATR' approach of African Christian theologians.⁶³

Historical studies

Until the 1960s, African traditional religions were studied virtually only synchronically by anthropologists observing how they were actually practised, and comparatively by the scissor and

⁵⁶ Parrinder 1969³: 2. He was careful to point out that his 'West African religion' was a construction, developed from data on four categories of beliefs in God, divinities, ancestors, and charms, and that there were significant differences between the single religions in some of these departments, such as the place of God in West African traditional religions, whether he was supreme, as among the Akan, or a *primus inter pares*, as among the Yoruba. For that reason, he termed 'West African religion' polytheistic (Parrinder 1969: 10-25; cf. also Parrinder 1951; Westerlund 1985: 18).

⁵⁷ Parrinder 1968³

⁵⁸ Parrinder 1968; cf. also Parrinder 1967

⁵⁹ Parrinder 1976: 15, 17

⁶⁰ Cf. Shaw 1990a: 342-347; 1990b: 182-183. That template, moreover, caused Christian authors to evaluate negatively and condemn features particular to African indigenous religions, such as pragmatism, which were thought to be not common to the Judaean-Christian tradition (Shaw 1990a: 343, 351-352, note 11).

⁶¹ Cf. also Hackett's criticism of the a-historical character of Parrinder's survey of the religions of Ibadan, Nigeria (Parrinder 1953). He also fails to investigate the interaction and interdependence between these religions, and how the worshippers behave in a religious pluralistic environment (Hackett 1989: 7).

⁶² Parrinder 1954: 55-110

⁶³ Cf. also Shaw 1990: 343 who correctly argues that Parrinder's de-contextualising 'catalogue' approach 'left differences out of focus and thereby contributed to the Western image of African religions as homogeneous'.

paste compilations from ethnographies by scholars of religions.⁶⁴ It was more or less taken for granted that no histories of these religions could be produced because they had not produced texts. Parrinder used this argument to justify his synchronic, comparative approach to 'African traditional religion'. Ogot exposed it as 'the old excuse employed for a long time by Western scholars to deny the existence and authenticity of African history'. He asserted that not only the political and economical, but also the religious histories of pre-colonial societies could be written, and often at the same time, because e.g. the political and religious dimensions of traditional societies in Africa were usually closely interwoven.⁶⁵

That did become true in the 1960s, when the governments of the new states of Africa put a high priority on the rapid development of the archaeology and history of Africa and its peoples, pre-colonial states, the colonial epoch, the struggle for independence, and nation building, because of the need to produce the history which colonial prejudice and lack of interest had denied them, and for the legitimate reason that they needed it for the construction of their national and African identities. Fairly strong departments of history and archaeology were established in most Anglophone universities.⁶⁶ As a result, the archaeology and history of Africa, its regions, and new nations developed very quickly. By the mid-seventies, they had become mature disciplines with solid publications, textbooks, journals, and conferences. These post-colonial political decisions have fundamentally altered the views on the possibility of the historical study of African traditional religions.

Most of the studies produced in the first three decades of the development of the history of Africa heavily emphasized political and economical history and [116] contributed only indirectly to the study of the religions, traditional and other,⁶⁷ of Africa by producing a sound historical framework within which 'historical questions [could] be asked about religious ideas and institutions in African societies':⁶⁸ how African religions functioned, e.g. politically, in a specific ethnic group, or region, at a specific time.⁶⁹ Such a reconstruction is possible only in as far as historical data will allow it, and should be undertaken only after the sources of those – oral as well as written – data have been subjected to proper 'source criticism' and thereby tested for their reliability and representativity.⁷⁰

The history of the religions of Africa, as it has begun to develop, is of a markedly different type from the historical-philological study of the scriptural religions. In the absence of religious texts, it must usually be part and parcel of political, economical, social, linguistic and other

⁶⁴ I disregard here the works of German and Austrian ethnologists of the 'culture history school' (Ankermann, Graebner, Frobenius, and Schebesta and other disciples of Wilhelm Schmidt) in the last decade of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century for two reasons. One is that they mainly served museological purposes in the colonial metropolis. The other is that they had virtually no influence upon the history I am concerned with because of the language barrier between German ethnology and the study of the religions of Africa after Germany had lost its colonies in Africa in the First World War. Friday Mbon, however, is reviving a key notion of this school, that of the 'culture area' (Mbon 1996).

⁶⁵ Ogot 1970: 182-183; Ranger & Kimambo 1972: 2-3, 9-10, 17

⁶⁶ Cf. Platvoet 1989: 120

⁶⁷ On the history of the study of Christianity in Africa, cf. Hasting 1990; on that of the study of Islam in Africa, cf. Hunwick 1976; Clarke 1990

⁶⁸ Ranger & Kimambo 1972: 3.

⁶⁹ Of course, not only in pre-colonial, but also in colonial, and post-colonial times, right up to this very day; cf. Ranger & Kimambo 1972: 21; Hackett 1991.

⁷⁰ In order to forestall e.g. that they represent only the views of the upper class, as was the case in much earlier anthropology. It collected primarily the oral traditions of ruling families. Cf. also Westerlund 1991: 21-22; 1993: 58-59.

history, and of archaeology.⁷¹ Though much more difficult because of the absence of religious texts, and scarce and difficult data, history of religions of Africa has, in as far as it can be done, two major virtues: that of a high degree of contextualisation – it can only study a religion as it functioned in a specific geo-historical context –; and high degree of being representative of the religious practices of the believers themselves: the religion it shows in action is the ‘unpremeditated’ one of the diffuse religious community, not the articulate theology of a, or a few, authors of texts.

A history of the historical study of the religions of Africa must still be written.⁷² Such a study will show that the history of the several forms of Christianity and Islam in Africa began as long ago, and in as humble ways, as the history of the ethnographic and comparative study of the traditional religions of Africa, which I am mainly setting out in this article. If we limit ourselves for now again to the historical study of African traditional religions and refer for its amateur beginnings back to what has already been said about the amateur phase of the ethnographic and anthropological study of African traditional religions, then we may set the beginning of the historical study of African traditional religions by academic historians and anthropologists for now in 1970,⁷³ when Ranger organised a conference at Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania, and another at Chilema, in Malawi, in 1971, on the history of African religious systems in East(ern) and Central Africa. From these conferences three volumes of studies resulted, which established a major tradition in the historical study of religions in those regions, particularly of the African traditional religions in interaction [117] with immigrant Christianity; of prophets and prophecy in Eastern African societies; of Christianity and Islam in colonial and post-colonial society; of the ‘territorial cults’ in that region; of an exceptional ‘martyr cult’, with a long and rich history, that of Mbona in Southern Malawi, which was extensively studied by Schoffeleers.⁷⁴

The historical study of religions in the other parts of Africa south of the Sahara, the traditional ones included, has also developed well in the last three decades, be it in a more dispersed, less visible manner than in the highly visible ‘Ranger school’ for Anglophone East, Central, and parts of Southern Africa. By way of mere examples of historical studies of traditional religions in West Africa, I may refer to some on Akan traditional religion in the nineteenth and early twentieth century,⁷⁵ and to Hackett’s historical ethnography of Calabar traditional religion, and her analysis of its revitalising transformation in recent decades, in her survey of the religions of Calabar.⁷⁶ A history of the ATRs of South Africa has recently been sketched by Kiernan.⁷⁷ In addition to the studies on the role of the religions of Africa in the political and social history of a region or society,⁷⁸ the history of art in Africa has strongly developed in the

71. Cf. Ehret 1972, Gilsenan 1972, Posnansky 1972 on the use of linguistic, mythological and archaeological data in the historical study of African traditional religions.

72. Though elements of it may be found in Ranger 1979; van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985a: 2-3, 14, 25-28, 32-35; Schoffeleers 1992: 7-11; Westerlund 1993: 50-59.

⁷³ Cf. however above note 63 on the German-Austrian ‘culture history school’.

⁷⁴ Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger & Weller 1975; Schoffeleers 1978, 1992; Anderson & Johnson 1991, 1995; Hansen & Twaddle 1995. Cf. also Murray & Walls 1975: 94-95.

⁷⁵ Cf. Platvoet 1973, 1982b, 1985, 1991; Wilks 1975, 1988; McLeod 1975; Maier 1983; McCaskie 1980, 1981, 1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1995; Silverman 1987; Williams 1988

⁷⁶ Hackett 1989: 17-55, 100, 179-184, 200-203, 230-232, 280-282

⁷⁷ Kiernan 1995a, 1995b

⁷⁸ Cf. e.g. the discussion of James (1988) in Shaw (1990b: 189-190) for the development of this perspective in the study of the religion of the Uduk in Sudan. Cf. also Hansen & Twaddle 1995; Anderson & Johnson 1991, 1995.

last three decades and made significant contributions to religious history as expressed in art.⁷⁹ The most important centre of these studies is the journal *African Arts*, published by the Museum of Cultural History of the University of California at Los Angeles.⁸⁰

The historical study of new religious movements in Africa, in particular of the many forms of indigenous Christianity, were studied and documented extensively not only by anthropologists, though they clearly dominate that field, but also by some scholars of religions, most notably by Bengt Sundkler, Harold Turner,⁸¹ and Rosalind Hackett in her study of Calabar religions,⁸² and her essays on the dynamics of Nigeria's new religious movements (1967-1970).⁸³ Hackett's wedding a historical approach to sociological and thematic analyses of the religious scene of the town of Calabar in Nigeria⁸⁴ is one of the best studies in the religions of Africa of the past decade. It shows that its [118] religions were dynamically determining themselves how to respond to the new options in the religious market. It also shows that the religions of Africa can be studied in a specific context in a multidisciplinary manner, and that that can be done even by a single scholar. The pluralism, interaction and dynamic vitality of that one African religious scene are portrayed by Hackett in an exemplary way.

AFRICA AS SUBJECT

In this second section, on Africa as subject – or author – of the study of the religions of Africa, I follow the same order as in the first part. I deal first with examples of studies of African traditional religions by African amateur and professional anthropologists; then with one paradigmatic example of those by African Christian scholars in Departments of Religious Studies. I conclude with those by African historians. 'Africa as subject' of the study of the religions of Africa is what this book is about. In this section I will, therefore, confine myself to only a few paradigmatic examples from its history to show how also in Africa itself, the study of its religions developed from amateur ethnography into their study in basically three distinct academic disciplines: anthropology, religious studies, and history.⁸⁵

African amateur anthropology

The earliest contributions to the ethnography of African traditional religions by 'insiders' were by amateur African scholars, and again in both modest and immodest ways. They began quite early in the Gold Coast. Inspired by early forms of nationalism and demanding that the Gover-

⁷⁹ Cf. for the major contribution which art history made to the study of Yoruba traditional religion, Olupona 1993: 251-255

⁸⁰ Restricting myself again to the historical study of Akan religion and art, I may refer to Swithenbank 1969; Coronel 1979; McLeod 1981; Ross & Garrard 1983; Ross 1984; Gilbert 1989

⁸¹ Cf. e.g. Turner 1979

⁸² Hackett 1989: 95-116, 185-203, 226-230

⁸³ Hackett 1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1987d, 1991a, 1991b

⁸⁴ Hackett 1989

⁸⁵ This does not fully exhaust the study of African religions in the universities of Africa. In addition to anthropology of religion, inspired mainly by British Social Anthropology, there is a very limited number of studies in sociology of religion inspired mainly by Continental (Weberian) Sociology of Religion (e.g. Assimeng 1989). Moreover, the central position of philosophy in the French academic tradition has resulted in a fair amount of attention paid to the cultural heritage, traditional religion included, of Francophone African nations by African philosophers. They developed the discipline of African (Ethno-)Philosophy in not only the French-speaking parts of Africa, but more recently also in some English-speaking universities (cf. for example Wiredu 1980, Gyekye 1987).

nor institute a representative council that would allow them some political participation in the running of the Crown Colony, some young intellectuals, like the Fante lawyers J. Mensah Sarbah and J.E. Casely Hayford – scions of well-to-do coastal merchant families whose commercial and political influence had seriously suffered since the Gold Coast had become a Crown Colony in 1874 – began to study seriously the institutions of traditional Fante society. They published books on them in 1897 and 1903, which included information on some aspects of Fante traditional religion.⁸⁶ The same is even more true of the three books which Danquah published in 1928.⁸⁷

[119] Danquah (1895-1965) was a member of the Akim-Abuakwa ‘royal family’, read law and philosophy in London from 1921 to 1927, was called to the Bar in 1926 and obtained a doctorate in philosophy in 1927. Elliot Smith and W.J. Perry taught the then fashionable amateur ‘hyper-diffusionist’ explanation of human cultures of the pan-Egyptian, or ‘heliocentric’, variety at the University College London. Danquah may have learned in that connection also about Winckelmann’s ‘pan-Babylonian’, or ‘selenocentric’, theory, which held that all cultures had their origin in Mesopotamia.⁸⁸ Back in the Gold Coast, he practised law, and became the leading nationalist politician till Nkrumah displaced him in 1947. Danquah worked for three years on a three volume book entitled *Gold Coast Ethics and Religion: A Theory of Morals and Religion in the Akan Tradition*, of which the first two volumes were lost in a fire in 1941. Its ‘third and crowning portion’ he published in 1944 as *The Akan Doctrine of God*.⁸⁹ Though the book contained important ethnographic elements from Akim-Abuakwa traditional religion, its description of that Akan religion, ‘as it really was’, was a parade of Danquah’s speculative ethical philosophy, and a normative exposition, by means of a selective use of elements of Akan culture, of what Danquah thought Akan traditional religion must have been like – and should continue to be – despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Central to Danquah’s version was the monotheistic Creator-God⁹⁰ as the Great Ancestor.⁹¹ He regarded the ancestors as merely mediators between humans and the Great Ancestor. They were not approached as independent agents.⁹² And he viewed the gods as divinised ancestors.⁹³ It was Danquah’s nationalist contention that Akan traditional religion was as ethical and monotheistic a religion as were Christianity and Islam; and that all its other departments were superstitious accretions.⁹⁴ Moreover, Akan traditional religion had an even longer pedigree than Christianity and Islam. He speculated on the basis of curious etymologies that it had its cradle in ancient Mesopotamia.⁹⁵

Other hyper-diffusionist interpretations of an African traditional religion were proposed by the Yoruba Egyptological scholar O. Lucas who looked to Egypt as the fountainhead of Yoruba religion,⁹⁶ and by other Nigerians.⁹⁷

⁸⁶ Sarbah 1968³; Casely Hayford 1970²

⁸⁷ Danquah 1928a, 1928b, 1928c

⁸⁸ On these schools, cf. van Baal 1971: 101-102

⁸⁹ Danquah 1968²

⁹⁰ Danquah 1968: 58-77; Danquah was inclined to accept Wilhelm Schmidt’s degenerative theory of primeval monotheism (*Urmonotheismus*); cf. Dickson 1968: xi.

⁹¹ Danquah 1968: 7-8, 19-23, 27-29, 166-169, 183

⁹² Danquah 1968: 53

⁹³ Danquah 1968: 28; cf. Dickson 1968: xx

⁹⁴ Danquah 1968: 39

⁹⁵ Danquah 1968: 45-46, 49-52. Cf. also Smith 1966a: 3-4; 1966b: 107; Dickson 1968: x-xii; Westerlund 1985: 30, 49-50

⁹⁶ Lucas 1948; cf. also Olupona 1993: 243-244

⁹⁷ Cf. Samb 1981; Westerlund 1985: 38, 49; Hackett 1989: 21, 44; Zuesse 1991: 182; Olupona 1993: 244

[120] *African anthropologists*

African anthropologists were, and are, few and far between because of the stigma of anthropology of a too intimate an association with the colonial enterprise.⁹⁸ Two African anthropologists may, however, be mentioned in colonial times: Jomo Kenyatta (1897-1978) and Kofi A. Busia (1913-1978). Like Danquah, Busia was an Akan 'royal' (*odehye*), and Kenyatta's father and grandfather were leaders in Kikuyu rural society. Both studied anthropology: Kenyatta with Malinowski at the London School of Economics (LSE) from 1935 to 1937, and Busia at Oxford with Radcliffe-Brown and Fortes from 1940 to 1942, and with Evans-Pritchard in 1946-1947. Both worked for a period in the colonial administration: Kenyatta held a post with the Town Council of Nairobi from the early 1920s till 1928, and Busia served as the first ever African Assistant District Commissioner from 1942 till 1944, when he fell out with his seniors and quitted. He was also government anthropologist in charge of a survey of the Takoradi district from 1947 till 1949, when he was appointed Lecturer in African Studies in the new University College at Achimota. He became Professor of Sociology in 1954, but resigned in 1956 to become leader of the opposition to Nkrumah in Parliament.⁹⁹ Finally, both Kenyatta's and Busia's researches were in 'political anthropology' and politically motivated.

Kenyatta's anthropological study of traditional Kikuyu society and religion was as much a political act as all his other work had been since he had become the Secretary-General of the Kikuyu Central Association in 1928 and its spokesman in the struggle of the Gikuyu against the colonial government over rights to the lands which white settlers had taken from them. It was likewise an eloquent political act, and a religious one, when he changed the name he had received at his Christian baptism, Johnstone, into Jomo, 'Burning Spear', in 1938 on the occasion of the publication of his *Facing Mount Kenya*. He made the implied political and religious messages even more explicit by putting on the frontispiece of the book a photograph of himself in traditional attire and a spear in his right hand, while testing the sharpness of its point with his left. There was certainly also a political inspiration in the romantic picture he presented of traditional Gikuyu society: it was orderly and cohesive even when executing 'wizards'.¹⁰⁰ The colonial context, as an imposed, unjust, and destructive force, was the focus of the book, but he also described in some detail a new religious movement, the *Arathi*, 'prophets', which combined [121] Christian and traditional practices and beliefs.¹⁰¹ His own religious evolution towards a post-Christian, neo-traditional synthesis with elements of parapsychology, coloured his interpretation of Gikuyu 'magical and medical practices',¹⁰² for which Malinowski chided him mildly.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Cf. Platvoet 1989: 122-123; Westerlund 1991: 19. The notable exception to this rule are the native white anthropologists of South Africa, of British descent (among them Meyer Fortes, Max Gluckman, Isaac Shapera, Hilda Kuper, Monica (Hunter-)Wilson, Audrey Richards, Elisabeth Colson, and M.G. Marwick). Most of them obtained a position in the metropolitan establishment and held important positions in British universities. I prefer to pass them over here, except to mention that they all did 'fieldwork' in South or Southern Africa, and contributed thereby in important ways to our knowledge of Southern Bantu religions, except Meyer Fortes who studied the Talensi and Akan societies of the Gold Coast.

⁹⁹ Cf. Rosberg 1992, and Dickie & Rake 1993: 162-164 for brief biographies of Kenyatta and Busia.

¹⁰⁰ Kenyatta 1961²: 299-308

¹⁰¹ Kenyatta 1961: 267-279

¹⁰² Kenyatta 1961: 280-308

¹⁰³ Malinowski 1938: XII-XIII

Busia knew colonial political praxis from two opposed, yet in the Dual Mandate intimately linked sides: that of the traditional rulers, and that of the colonial administration. His book¹⁰⁴ focused on the changes which the colonial context forced upon the traditional rulers. Because he was a full-time politician from 1956 onwards, his contribution to the study of African traditional religions remained limited to one major essay.¹⁰⁵ That one essay is, however, still one of the best brief introductions to Akan traditional religion. Busia presented some data on the history of its ethnography till then, set it squarely in its historical contexts, presented an admirable summary of its mono- and polytheistic beliefs, analysed the interplay between Akan religious conceptions of man and the social organisation of Akan matrilineal society and its weak patrilineal 'balance', and set out the role of the cult of the ('royal') ancestors in Akan political organisation. The weakness is in the last pages, in which Busia presented a static picture of Akan traditional religion in 'the contemporary situation'; and in the elements which Busia ignored: the beliefs in charms, medicines and *mmoatia* – the 'little beings' which the Akan believed to live in the forests –, witchcraft beliefs, and witch cleansing cults.

With the relative exception of South Africa¹⁰⁶ and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Social and Cultural Anthropology has developed weakly in the universities of the independent states of Africa. It was either given a minute place in Departments of Sociology, or more often in the multi-disciplinary Institutes of African Studies.¹⁰⁷

The contributions to the study of religions by African anthropologists and sociologists have, therefore, been few. Moreover, as these disciplines did develop strongly in Europe and especially North America after 1960, the best of these few African anthropologists were siphoned off to universities outside Africa. Yet, the contribution of African anthropologists is badly needed in Africa, e.g. in the analysis of Western and Christian biases in the representation of African traditional cultures and religions. So far, only Okot p'Bitek made a significant contribution in this respect by his vehement critique of the 'Judaean-Christian spectacles'¹⁰⁸ of Evans-Pritchard in his classical study of Nuer religion, Griaule, and Tempels,¹⁰⁹ and of others, like Mbiti and Danquah, for 'hellenizing' African traditional concepts of God by 'smuggling' the metaphysical [122] concepts of Greek and Christian scholasticism, such as 'omnipotent', 'omniscient', etc., into African traditional beliefs about their deities.¹¹⁰ He was all the more furious at them, because in his view the Acholi did not have 'recourse to God as a working hypothesis'.¹¹¹ He demanded that 'all forms of subjectivity, whether [...] from anti-Christian, or from pro-Christian prejudices' be rejected.¹¹² But p'Bitek died early.¹¹³

¹⁰⁴ Busia 1968²

¹⁰⁵ Busia 1954

¹⁰⁶ Cf. however the complaint of Kuper (1987) that the field of study of Social Anthropology in Southern Africa is now swamped by political scientists and scholars from other social sciences.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Platvoet 1989: 120, 122-123

¹⁰⁸ The term is Horton's; cf. Horton 1984; Horton 1993: 161-193. Horton was strongly influenced by p'Bitek in his views of the new 'bane' to the study of African religions: the Christianisation of African traditional religions by anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, and by 'the Devout Opposition'. By that term he referred to the African Christian scholars in Departments of Religious Studies in Africa, who opposed his interpretation of 'conversion in Africa' (cf. Horton 1984: 391-392; 1993: 191).

¹⁰⁹ p'Bitek 1971: 49-50, 71, 110-111

¹¹⁰ Cf. p'Bitek 1971: 41, 46-47, 80, 86-88

¹¹¹ p'Bitek 1971: 100

¹¹² p'Bitek 1971: 108

¹¹³ For an incisive analysis of p'Bitek's ideology, cf. Westerlund 1985: 10, 60-63; 1991: 18; 1993: 48.

Moreover, some African anthropologists not only described the beliefs of an African traditional religion, or 'West African traditional religion', or 'African traditional religion', in highly de-contextualizing ways, but actually, even more than Kenyatta, adopted them as their personal belief. Integrating them into their personal, Christian or post-Christian, religion, they presented proper theologies of them.

An example is Kofi Asare Opoku. He was Associate Professor of the Institute of African Studies in the University of Ghana at Legon and is now a retired Professor of Religious Studies at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania. Michael Warren used him as academic commentator in his ethnographic film *Bono Medicine*, on the interaction between traditional Bono-Akan religious healing, and modern Western hospital healing systems in Takyiman, Ghana. In that film, Asare asserts in no uncertain terms the ontological reality of the Akan gods, of possession by them, of the *sunsum* – one of the three souls each human being possesses in Akan belief –, of witches and witchcraft, and of the meta-empirical efficacy of traditional 'medicine. In his *West African Traditional Religion*, he attacked Evans-Pritchard for declaring witchcraft an 'imaginary offence'; which it was definitively not in Opoku's view. To him, it was 'real beyond fantasy or mere imagination'.¹¹⁴ It was, therefore, perhaps appropriate that Opoku contributed a further statement of his theology of Akan traditional religion in the recent *Festschrift* for Mbiti, in which he chided African Christian theologians for taking African traditional religion as *praeparatio evangelica* only, and not 'as a religion in its own right' and as a profound 'experience of the divine-human encounter'. Opoku took 'African traditional religion [as] one of the ways in which Africans have experienced God's salvific activity in their history', because 'God is the God of all human-kind'.¹¹⁵ Its myths 'are not mere fables'; 'there is no denial of the fact that the dead continue to live' and that there is 'an indissoluble union between the living and their dead relatives'. Therefore, 'the dead do not just fade into nothingness'. On the contrary: 'the ancestors live [123] because they return to *Onyame* [God]', and 'help to confirm belief in a living God'.¹¹⁶

The traditional religions of Africa, the African-Christian or 'indigenous' churches and the other new developments in the religious scene have, therefore, very much remained the field of study of white anthropologists. Their number has dramatically increased in the last four decades.¹¹⁷ As few African students choose anthropology as an academic career, and even fewer anthropology of religion, it was mainly white expatriate anthropologists in African Universities, most staying for a few years only, some permanently, e.g. Robin Horton, and the relatively few native white anthropologists, like Bourdillon,¹¹⁸ who made the most important contributions to the study of the traditional societies and religions of Africa. Their studies of these religions are highly contextualized by the nature of the anthropological perspective, but they now pay attention also to the diachronic and dynamic aspects. They study African religions in their changing historical settings, as far as the data available will allow. Another virtue of modern anthropological studies of the traditional and other religions of Africa, is an acute

¹¹⁴ Opoku 1978: 141, 146. Cf. also Westerlund 1985: 38, 43 note 94.

¹¹⁵ Opoku 1993: 66, 69-70

¹¹⁶ Opoku 1993: 73, 75. Opoku nearly completely ignored the gods, witches, and medicines in this essay.

¹¹⁷ Before 1950, only one Dutch anthropologist had done fieldwork in Africa. Now there is an African Studies Centre at Leiden, a chair in the Anthropology of Africa in Leiden University, in which Busia, Beattie, and Kuper taught, and a Association of African Studies with over two hundred members, many of them anthropologists (Kloos 1992: 49).

¹¹⁸ Cf. e.g. Bourdillon 1987

awareness of the hermeneutical, and other problems of methodology involved, as is apparent from the contribution of Michael Bourdillon to this volume.¹¹⁹

African Christian theologians

The greatest contribution, at least in terms of numbers of publications, to the study of the religions of Africa, and also to those of the traditional societies, by scholars based in a university in Africa has come from Departments of Religious Studies¹²⁰ in the past four decades. That contribution is amply documented in this volume in Jacob Olupona's two surveys in this volume, the first of the study of religions in Nigeria,¹²¹ and the other about that study in the other nations of West Africa;¹²² by Martin Prozesky's article on South Africa,¹²³ and, in a more limited way, by Teresia Hinga's contribution on Kenya.¹²⁴ If numerically the most important, it was also, as several analyses have shown in the past decade,¹²⁵ methodologically and theoretically the weakest, in particular in the publications of the first generation of African Christian theologians.¹²⁶ It is unfortunate [124] that some of them achieved paradigmatic status and established the unitary ATR, 'African traditional religion', approach for the study of the traditional religions of Africa in these departments.

Idowu's *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (1973¹) concluded, and canonized, a development from Parrinder's ATR as a unifying concept to ATR as 'the [indigenous] religion [of Africa], which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans'. By presenting it as Africa's 'God-given heritage', which is 'now a recognized course in African universities, training colleges, and seminaries', and an examination subject 'in the upper classes of secondary schools',¹²⁷ Idowu concluded the transition from ATR as a concept in the comparative study of ATRs to ATR as a putative historical reality, a pan-africanist ideology, and an established academic institution with not only a scholarly, but also with religious, cultural, and political functions. The religious one was the indigenisation of the still highly Western Christianity of the mainline churches, whose theologians, trained in European and American Christian theologies, manned the Departments of Religious Studies. The cultural function was the restoration of a respectable religious past, thereby uplifting the self-respect and identity of the educated Africans *vis à vis* the dominant Western colonial culture of the very recent past. The political function was to 'help to bring about national unity' in Africa's ethnically plural societies, which were rife with tensions, by de-emphasizing the differences between the indigenous religions and by highlighting the theistic beliefs they had in common.¹²⁸

¹¹⁹ Cf. Bourdillon 1996

¹²⁰ On the change of Departments of Divinity or Theology into Departments of Religious Studies, or Departments for the Study of Religions, after 1960, cf. Platvoet 1989: 113-115.

¹²¹ Cf. Olupona 1996a

¹²² Cf. Olupona 1996b

¹²³ Cf. Prozesky 1996

¹²⁴ Cf. Hinga 1996. On East and Southern Africa, cf. also Murray & Walls 1975

¹²⁵ Cf. Horton 1984: 395sq.; Westerlund 1985: 44-56, 76-81; 1991: 16-19; 1993: 45-46; Platvoet 1989: 111-113, 117; Shaw 1990a, 1990b

¹²⁶ Jacob Olupona points to an important 'amateur' phase of Christian indigenous theology in the history of the study of Yoruba traditional religion preceding that of the academic liberal theology of Idowu and others. Olupona describes the re-evaluation of Ifa divination belief in Orunmila, that the Yoruba Anglican priest E.M. Li-jadu undertook from a *praeparatio evangelica* perspective as early as 1898 (!) (Olupona 1993: 245).

¹²⁷ Idowu 1975³: IX, X; his italics; cf. also Hackett 1990: 305-306; Shaw 1990a: 345-346

¹²⁸ Westerlund 1985: 89; Platvoet 1989: 121; Shaw 1990a: 344; 1990b: 183-185; Olupona 1993: 246-247

Idowu was aware that ATR was ‘an impossible proposition, where detailed study and thoroughness [of scholarship] are concerned’. He presented the term as ‘tentative’, as ‘the result of a search for a comprehensive title’, and as ‘useful’.¹²⁹ Despite these avowals and cautions, he presented ATR as a historical reality on two grounds: the pan-Africanist ideology of ‘a common Africanness’; and the religious postulate, derived from Abrahamic monotheism, that ‘the concept of God [...] is a common thread [running] throughout the continent’. It ‘is the real cohesive factor’, and ‘the ground [on which] we can speak of the religion of Africa in the singular’.¹³⁰

Much more was involved, however, than just a tentative term. Idowu saw ATR as the dawn of ‘the day of theology in the perspective of Africa’, because ‘African theologians [had begun] to apprehend African spiritual values with the African mind’.¹³¹ He held that ‘religion is an ultimate fact of human nature’; that man [125] had been religious ‘from the dawn of consciousness’; and had been monotheistic from primeval times, polytheism and magic being rather natural, but unfortunate degenerations.¹³² The ancestors were no major problem for Idowu in his theocentric model of ATR: they were ‘the living dead’ and as such ‘truly members of the families on earth’, and ‘to some extent [...] intermediaries between Deity – Idowu’s term for God – or the divinities’.¹³³ The abundant polytheism of the Yoruba, however, clearly confused and embarrassed Idowu, in particular because the traditional religion of his own ethnic background, the Yoruba, formed the ethnographic paradigm from which he extrapolated to the pan-African ATR. So he explained a major part of them away, as due to priestcraft, as duplications and triplications by the confusions of migrations, as deified heroes and ancestors, and as ‘conceptualisations of certain prominent attributes of Deity’. After this reduction, he was left with one category: the divinities of heaven. They were, he thought, ‘part of the original order of things’, and therefore ‘beyond man’s probing’: ‘their very origins belong to divine secret’;¹³⁴ and anyway, divinities ‘have no absolute existence’.¹³⁵

These passages show that Idowu was not merely an academic scholar of ATR on the Yoruba model, but also its believer, theologian, and reformer. Its Deity was God; the divinities of heaven were ‘part of the original order of things’, and ‘intermediaries between Deity and man’.¹³⁶ The ancestors were the living dead and members of their extended families. And witches and witchcraft were a ‘very painful’, ‘very disastrous’ and ‘urgent reality’, ‘out-and-out diabolic’. The disembodied souls of witches flew out at night ‘in the form of particular birds’ to extract ‘the ethereal bodies of their victims’ and devour them in their covens.¹³⁷ Idowu appealed for further support for his beliefs in witches and their craft to theories in parapsychology about

¹²⁹ Idowu 1975: 105-106

¹³⁰ Idowu 1975: 103-104; cf. also Baum 1990: 357-358; Shaw 1990a: 344-345

¹³¹ Idowu 1975: XI

¹³² Idowu 1975: 73, 74, 89, 166, 192

¹³³ Idowu 1975: 184

¹³⁴ Idowu 1975: 172-173; cf. also Shaw 1990b: 184

¹³⁵ Idowu 1975: 168

¹³⁶ Idowu 1975: 170

¹³⁷ Idowu 1975: 175-176. The most explicit confession by Idowu of his belief in witches and witchcraft is in Idowu 1970: 6. Idowu's successor as Professor of Religious Studies in Ibadan University, Awolalu, likewise confessed to the reality of witchcraft (Awolalu 1979: 91). Omoyajowo wrote a popular tract about witchcraft, which in its own way also affirmed the (possible) reality of witches. The quintessence of his message is that African Christians need not, and indeed must not, believe in witches nor fear them even if they exist, because ‘they are harmless to those who follow Christ’. For ‘Christ by his death on the Cross has overcome death, the devil and all its forces – witches, wizards, sorcerers, ghosts and jinns’ (Omoyajowo 1971: 40). Cf. also Westerlund 1985: 36-38, 43, notes 94, 95.

‘persons of strong character who can exude their personalities’ and cause psychological and physical disasters by telepathy; and even to Freud’s compulsion neurosis.¹³⁸

I submit that ATR as ‘described’ by Idowu and Opoku is better studied as new theologies constructing a new religion and offering it to a new brand of Africans in a new – pan-Nigerian, pan-West-African, and pan-African – market.¹³⁹ They are not [126] valid academic exercises in the historical study of African religions past and present. At least not from the point of view of the methodology of empirical science, for that requires metaphysical neutrality and testability. Their ‘validity’ is at the meta-testable level of a theology inspired by particular beliefs. Idowu, Opoku and others are, despite their academic positions, better studied, as the newest objects, and not as subjects, of history of religions. I expect that similar conclusions will be reached in respect of studies of the religions of Africa of many other Christian – and other – theologians in Departments of Religious Studies in Africa,¹⁴⁰ and elsewhere. After all, they – Opoku and some other anthropologists included – are theologians, and it is the theologian’s business to re-produce and produce marketable religions.

Though the unitary ideology, established by Idowu, still holds sway in many Departments of Religious Studies in Anglophone Africa, some of the essays collected in this volume, especially those of Mbon and Olupona, show that new, more regional, local, and historical approaches are now challenging the hegemony of unitary ATR.¹⁴¹

African historians

The number of African historians in Departments of History in universities in Africa who research African religious history and publish on the dynamics of African traditional religions are as yet few – even in East, Central, and Southern Africa, despite the impact of the ‘Ranger school’ – as is apparent from the number of African contributors to the three volumes of studies which it published. The first volume has five African, and ten non-African, contributors. These five contributed on the Lozi royal cult in Barotseland, in western Zambia, before 1900,¹⁴² on the search for rituals which might produce political and territorial integration among the Upare in north-eastern Tanzania in the pre-colonial era,¹⁴³ on the religious history of the Padhola, a Southern Luo group in eastern Uganda, since 1500,¹⁴⁴ and on the role of the prophet Kinjikitile in the Maji Maji revolt against German colonial rule in Southern Tanganyika between 1905 to 1907.¹⁴⁵ The second volume did not have a single African contributor. Only one essay was contributed by an African historian to the third volume, the collection on ‘territorial cults’ edited by Schoffeleers. It was Bhebe’s, on the adoption of Mwari, the God of the Karanga and other Shona in what is now Western Zimbabwe, by their conquerors, the Ngoni Ndebele. He also published a monograph on the religious history of Western Zimbabwe from the early nineteenth century till 1923.¹⁴⁶ African historians writing on African traditional [127]

¹³⁸ Idowu 1975: 176-177

¹³⁹ And with considerable success! Cf. Baum (1990: 358): Idowu’s and Mbiti’s monotheistic ‘interpretation has become gospel in secondary school textbooks used in Nigeria and is reshaping many African communities’ interpretation of spiritual beings’.

¹⁴⁰ For instance John Mbiti (cf. Westerlund 1985: 44-45; Shaw 1990a: 345; 1990b: 185)

¹⁴¹ Cf. also Shaw 1990a: 345-346; 1990b: 185-186, 188-190

¹⁴² Mainga 1972

¹⁴³ Kimambo & Omari 1972

¹⁴⁴ Ogot 1972

¹⁴⁵ Gwassa 1972

¹⁴⁶ Bhebe 1978, 1979

religions seem still few and far between,¹⁴⁷ whereas the traditional religions that need to be studied in their many transformations and functions, past and present, are many.¹⁴⁸

‘Scriptural’ Islam, and Islam in Africa are studied historically in Departments for Islamic Studies at Ibadan University in Nigeria, at the University of Durban-Westville, in South Africa, and in other Departments at Ilorin, Nigeria, and Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Belleville in South Africa as described in this volume in the papers of Abubakre and Haron.¹⁴⁹ The Eastern religions are studied historically in the Department for Hindu Studies in the University of Durban-Westville, described in this volume by Sooklal.¹⁵⁰

The historical study of the religions of Africa is found, however, not only in Departments of History, in Departments for Islamic Studies, and for Hindu Studies, but also in Departments of Religious Studies. The latter inherited the academic traditions of the Faculties of Theology of the Northern hemisphere, in which the historical study of the Christian, and after 1870, of also the other ‘scriptural’ religions of mankind has been pursued, often with high academic standards. Historical studies in the Departments of Religious Studies in Africa have, however, been confined mainly to the study of the history of the mainline ‘mission’ churches in Africa, and to a few of the many indigenous Christian churches.¹⁵¹ Most have only recently begun to pay limited attention to ‘scriptural’ Islam, and Islam in Africa.¹⁵² This was even more so for the religions of India, in India itself and in Africa. Only in the Departments of Religious Studies of Natal University, and Cape Town, and the Department of Science of Religion in the University of Durban-Westville, and in the University of South Africa in Pretoria, was there some developments in the study of Hinduism and other Indian religions in South Africa.¹⁵³ Likewise, the study of (South African) Judaism received special attention only in the Department of Religious Studies in the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.¹⁵⁴ The study of the traditional religions of Africa, historical or otherwise, has also begun to receive attention only recently in Departments of Religious Studies, or of Science of Religion, in South Africa.

In the other nations of Anglophone Africa, the historical study of African traditional religions was impeded until recently by the hegemony of the comparative, synchronic, unitary ATR model. That paradigm was not only pan-africanist in its ideology, but also a-historical and de-contextualizing in its approach because of its religionist inspiration; because of the overriding need to use their own research on them for the development [128] of African (Christian) theologies; and because of the accepted divisions of fields of study in the academy which assigned their historical study to (historical) anthropology, and to art, political, or social history, and the a-temporal, systematic, comparative, and crypto-theological approach of Departments of Religious Studies.

The softening of the acrimony between ‘reductionists’ and ‘religionists’¹⁵⁵ since 1980 has meanwhile allowed for the introduction into Departments of Religious Studies of less polarized views, like those of Harold Turner. In a programmatic article on the study of African traditio-

¹⁴⁷ E.g. the collections of essays in historical anthropology edited by Anderson & Johnson in 1991 and 1995 do not have a single contribution by a historian or anthropologist posted in an African university.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. on recent transformations of African traditional religions, Hackett 1991

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Abubakre 1996, Haron 1996

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Sooklal 1996

¹⁵¹ Cf. e.g. Baëta 1962, Dickson 1964, Sanneh 1983

¹⁵² Cf. my ‘The religions of Africa in their historical order’ in this volume for bibliographical references

¹⁵³ Cf. Platvoet 1996 for bibliographical references.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Hellig’s contribution to this volume

¹⁵⁵ Despite Horton (1984)

nal religions in Departments of Religious Studies, he stated that the academic study of Religions is a multi-disciplinary and poly-methodological enterprise by 'the nature of the field', because 'religion is a human activity and experience that is liable to be interwoven with all aspects of human life; [...] its study, therefore, requires, sooner or later, all the human sciences'. Turner did explicitly assert the *sui generis* character of religion,¹⁵⁶ as well as the need for 'the distinctively religious disciplines of the phenomenology and history of religions' for 'the systematic study of the distinctive and peculiar features of religion'; and he added those of philosophy of religion and theology of religion(s). Even so, he admitted the need of a wide range of other disciplines for the study of 'the non-religious context and conditioning to which all religions are subject', among them the social sciences and history.¹⁵⁷

Fine examples of this poly-methodological approach to the study of African traditional religions are Olupona's recent historical and sociological study of the solidifying function of royal rituals in Ondo, Nigeria; and Danfulani's analysis of the central place of the *Pa* divination system in the traditional religions of three Chadic-speaking ethnic groups on the Eastern Bauchi plateau, also in Nigeria. Olupona studied Ondo kingship rituals over the past century as that traditional state's civil religion. He shows that the festivals ritualising Ondo kingship define Ondo identity for all Ondo-Yoruba, whether they be traditional believers, Christians, or Muslims. He documents the dynamic versatility and adaptability of this particular Nigerian traditional religion in the specifics of this particular town and time by its excelling in one of the many functions which a traditional religion may have, that of the providing its 'adherents' with a cherished group identity through public festivals, i.e. as a 'civil religion'.¹⁵⁸ Danfulani likewise provides a multi-dimensional approach to *Pa* divination by wedding historical, anthropological, comparative and 'phenomenological',¹⁵⁹ [129] approaches, as well as some of those developed in ritual studies in recent years. This combination of a variety of approaches is well suited to bring out the dynamic character of African religions, traditional and other, in the past as well as in the present. It is also the hallmark of most contributions by African and non-African scholars to two collections of studies on the place and the role of African traditional religions in the contemporary societies of Africa,¹⁶⁰ and on the role of religion in Nigeria, which Olupona, and Olupona & Falola edited.¹⁶¹

In conclusion

¹⁵⁶ He claimed, also on *sui generis* grounds, that religionist historians of religions were better equipped for the task of developing histories of 'primal' religions than secular historians (Turner 1981: 5-9, 12).

¹⁵⁷ Turner 1981: 1, 13. Turner was expressing here somewhat belatedly what had become already a *communis opinio* in parts of Europe and North America, where Sociology and Psychology had been, or were being, introduced as obligatory subjects for all undergraduate students in Faculties of Theology and Religious Studies, and sociologists and psychologists had become members of staff of faculties of theology, with their own (sub-)departments for the social-scientific study of religion.

¹⁵⁸ Olupona 1991b; for a further appreciation and critique, cf. Platvoet 1993: 334-337

¹⁵⁹ For Danfulani (1995: 19), the 'phenomenological' approach represents the attempt 'to achieve [...] an unprejudiced and unbiased position' in the study of a religion other than one's own. It is 'a search for objectivity' by a believing scholar. It emphasizes 'what the *homo religiosus* believes her/himself, rather than what others believe about him/her. A phenomenologist tries to explain the meaning of religious phenomena [for the believer], but does not consider [...] whether [his/her] religious judgements possess objective validity'.

¹⁶⁰ Olupona 1991

¹⁶¹ Olupona & Falola 1991

One may agree with Shaw¹⁶² that the approaches to the study of the religions of Africa of history, anthropology and religious studies, which were formerly often perceived not only as distinct but as exclusive and antagonistic, are now converging into a multidisciplinary complex for the contextualizing and well-rounded study of African religions. They are historical phenomena that shaped, and were shaped by, the societies of Africa in the past. They continue in this active and passive role in the modern contexts of the ethnically diverse nation states in the contexts of pan-Africanisation and globalisation.

African religions are now no longer the object of study by outsiders only. They have become also the object of intensive and extensive studies, of various sorts and kinds, by African scholars, for one reason because religions are important phenomena in all the societies of modern Africa; for another because some of the models of how to constitute a university in Africa allowed for the introduction of various sorts of study of religion(s) into some of them. So, African scholars of African religions are now contributing their part to the worldwide academic study of the religions of humankind in a substantive manner. They have taken their place in the global community of the academic study of religions. However, it is also clear from the analysis presented above that African scholars of African religions need to be in constant touch with that worldwide community in matters of methodology. They need to continue to contribute to,¹⁶³ and to participate in, the critical discussion of the matter, motives and methods of the academic study of religions. For the approaches by which scholars produce knowledge about the highly complex historical realities of the religions of Africa must be constantly critically reviewed and re-assessed, if we [130] are to produce better and more 'objective' knowledge about them: insights which can claim some improvement in impartiality, representativity and reliability after they have been critically tested, and accepted as for the moment valid knowledge, by the global scientific community which is – or ought to be –, in Köbben's definition of the science of culture, a 'democratic community of organized scepticism'.¹⁶⁴

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¹⁶² Cf. Shaw 1990b: 190

¹⁶³ Cf. Platvoet 1993 on contributions of African scholars to the methodology of the study of religions.

¹⁶⁴ Köbben 1974: 88

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