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Beyond ‘Primitivism’: ‘Indigenous Religions’

Jacob Kehinde Olupona (ed.) 2004, *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. New York, etc.: Routledge, xiv + 348 pp., illustrations, index, ISBN 0-415-27319-6 (hbk); 0-415-27320-X (pbk).

Graham Harvey (ed.) 2000, *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*. London, etc.: Cassell, XII+302 pp., integrated bibliography; indices of Subjects, Authors, Nations, Peoples and Groups, ISBN 0-304-70448-2, pbk

Karen Ralls-MacLeod & Graham Harvey (eds.) 2000, *Indigenous Religious Musics*. Aldershot, etc.: Ashgate, XI+225 pp., list of figures & music examples, [list of] recordings, CD Information, index, CD (= SOAS Musicology Series), ISBN 0-7546-0249-4 (hbk).

Graham Harvey (ed.) 2002, *Readings in Indigenous Religions*. London, etc.: Continuum, X+371 pp., integrated bibliography; indices of Subjects, Authors, Nations, Peoples and Groups; ISBN 0-8264-5101-2 (pbk).

[49]

‘Indigenous Religions’

These four publications are about ‘indigenous religions’. They embody an important semantic shift in acceptable scholarly terminology. While earlier designations of the native religions of precolonial societies of Africa and elsewhere as ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’ have long been abandoned as denigrating because they are replete with Western ethnocentric cultural and scholarly biases, the ameliorations of the latter as ‘primal’ or ‘archaic’ come in for similar criticism now, as do even the seemingly neutral ‘traditional’ and ‘preliterate’.

These four volumes are about three issues:

(1) methodology as demanding reflexivity: scholars must ‘bend back’ upon themselves to examine their *etic* (analytical) categories as culture-bound concepts in order to constantly purge West--ern(-Christian) biases and semantic and conceptual *emic* limitations from them;

(2) the peculiar traits distinguishing ‘indigenous religions’ – though immensely diverse – as a group from the other religions of humankind, more especially from Christianity and the other major religions of the ‘axial age’, the study of which has so far virtually exclusively determined scholarly notions of ‘religion’; and

(3) to particularise and contextualise the study of indigenous (or ‘ethnic’) religions and follow up their numerous rapid and incisive transformations till this very moment: the post-modern era of population explosion, ecological devastation, generalised literacy, the worldwide web, globalisation, Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’, and the rise of the ‘First Nations’ uniting into the Fourth World Movement to reclaim their ‘unceded’ territories and sovereignty from e.g. the USA.

Beyond primitivism

This volume contains twenty-two papers delivered at a conference at UC-Davis in March 1996, and a preface and introduction by Jacob Olupona, organiser of the conference and editor of the book. He emphasises that there is no single modernity: that of the colonising and Christianising, now globalising and secularising, West. There are numerous modernities, e.g. those of the indigenous peoples throughout the world which respond in their own way to the challenges and opportunities of the multi-faceted modern era. It is, he argues, even a key characteristic of modernity to be ‘multiple’, as is apparent both from the many different analyses of it by scholars, several of which are summarised by him, and from the numerous different ways in which distinct cultures adopt, adapt, synthesise or resist it (1-7). The volume contains four methodological papers, and eighteen ethnographic ones.

In the first of the methodological papers, Naomi Janowitz finds the root of the biases in modern theories on ritual as ‘exotic, bizarre, nonsensical, or absurd’ (23) in the Paganopapist legacy of Protestantism. It bequeathed its virulent anti-ritualism to nearly all theories about ritual from Tylor to Tambiah, on [50] the basis of

the theological dichotomy of ‘true religion’ *versus* ‘false magic’ which Protestants read into the Hebrew bible. Janowitz re-examines Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern scapegoat rituals in order to demonstrate that the Jews did not make good Protestants, for they performed them in ways that were no different from Hittite and Babylonian scapegoat rituals, and none considered these rituals as ‘magic’.

The second paper, by Armin W. Geertz, is in my view the focal article of this volume. It examines the history of ‘primitivist’ concepts in Western scholarship on indigenous religions. Geertz does not limit that history to the ‘social Darwinism’ of Victorian scholars like Müller, Spencer and Tylor, who qualified indigenous religions as ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ (48-49). He shows that ‘primitivism’ had both a long prehistory in European and American thought (38-46), and continues till this present day in the several forms of modern and post-modern primitivism: in modern art (e.g. Picasso), the hippie movement, Eliade and Turner at the University of Chicago, the neo-shamanism of anthropologists turned healers like Castenada, Harner, and Stoller, and feminist and artistic primitivisms (52-61). Geertz’s inclusion of Eliade and Turner among the ‘primitivists’ provoked heated discussion throughout the conference (9).

In the third paper, David Chidester discusses the contribution of Max Müller to ‘imperial comparative religion’ by examining his correspondence with the South African scholars Bleek and Callaway. In the fourth paper, Charles Long takes the concept of the (religions of the) ‘axial age’ of Karl Jaspers to task as excluding ‘the vision of the vanquished’ and providing an ideological justification for Western hegemony.

Among the papers discussing single indigenous religions, it is perhaps no surprise that only one indigenous religion in Europe is discussed: that of the Saami in the northern-most parts of Scandinavia, who suffered centuries of persecution as sorcerers and devil-worshippers from the Christian clergy. Yet, says Rydving, the most important opposition was not between Saamis and Christian clergymen, but between the Saami themselves. He distinguishes five positions among them: traditional activists; passive traditionalists, neutralists, passive Christians, and Christian activists (105-106).

But it does come as a surprise that this volume contains only one discussion of an African indigenous religion: Flora Kaplan’s of sacrifice in Benin religion (181-199). She emphasises that ‘the Benin neither eschew modernity nor abandon tra-

dition' (192). Church attendance is popular, but it is combined with some form of ancestor worship at home and with participation in the ritual life of the Palace, for the Oba 'constitutes the living symbol of Benin ethnic identity' (192).

Seven papers, however, are devoted to indigenous religions in the Americas. One is Karen McCarthy Brown's on Vodou among the Haitian community of New York (164-171). Because of the 'relentlessly racist stereotypy' reviling Vodou as 'replete with fear, lust and violence' and to be feared, Haitians who serve Vodou spirits [51] developed the habit of having a public and a private religion. McCarthy Brown notes especially the emergent transnationalist character of Vodou, 'parallel ceremonies being performed according to the same ritual calendar in Haiti and New York', and people, goods, and much money being exchanged between them (168-169). In addition, 'New York Vodou altars have begun to collect the spirits of Cuban Santeria and the implements of healers from West Africa' (171).

Three of the other six papers are John C. Mohawk's on the history of the intellectual oppression of indigenous religions by Europe (111-117); Alfredo Lopez Austin's on the guidelines for the study of Mesoamerican religions, in which sincere affiliation with the public Christian religion is combined with 'a refined polytheism [that] is easily adaptable to the Christian dualism' (122); and David Carrasco's paper on a Maya religious text which likewise shows that despite the 'radically asymmetrical relations of power' (130) and 'the crushing experience of European domination' (133), the Maya both sought 'the spiritual knowledge of the Spaniards' and kept 'their own religious habits alive' (135), e.g. in the rituals of the *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) (133-138).

In the remaining three papers, Chris Jocks, himself a Mohawk, discusses recent clashes between Iroquois Longhouse people and Quebec provincial police in 1990 over a golf course to be built on their sacred burial grounds; Bruce Lincoln examines religious conflicts in twentieth century Guatemala; and Helen McCarthy reports on the conflict over 'sacred mountains' in California between the original Indian inhabitants and New Age believers.

Of the remaining papers, six deal with indigenous religions in Asia. One examines modern developments in a Chinese indigenous religion, the cult of Earth Mother; another the response of popular religions to modernity in Japan; a third how the Ainu in the north of Japan have negotiated their religious identity in the past decades; a fourth how shamanism in Korea is now no longer viewed as

‘superstition’ but is respected as ‘religion’; a fifth how the Mandaya of south-east Mindanao in the Philippines maintain their religion in the face of encroaching Christianity and Islam; and a sixth how the Vāddas (aboriginal ‘forest people’) of Sri Lanka were defamed by historians and anthropologists as ‘wild men’ but actually worshipped the same guardian gods as the Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus and have vanished as a people by being drawn into hegemonic Sinhala Buddhism.

Lastly, three papers deal with developments in Oceania, one discussing cargo cults in Melanesia; another how Christianity and indigenous religions ‘merge’ in Papua New Guinea; and the third that the Hawaian *lei* (necklace of flowers) is actually an ‘invention of tradition’ by white settlers.

Despite the paucity of material on Africa, the book is greatly recommended, for it provides much food for thought on methodology and many models for the study of how indigenous religions fare in Africa’s modernity.

[52]

Indigenous religions and their musics

The indigenous religions of Africa are much better represented in the two volumes edited by Graham Harvey, and the musicological volume which Karen Ralls-MacLeod and he edited. In *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*, five of the sixteen chapters respect sub-Saharan Africa. In one, Fiona Bowie discusses the belief in witchcraft and healing among the Bangwa of Cameroon; in another, Platvoet examines an account of spirit possession among the Takyiman Bono of the Gold Coast, now Ghana, by Rattray; in a third, Berel Dov Lerner argues that Mary Douglas was right in dumping the myth of primitive piety, and Evans-Pritchard correct in representing the Azande as a secular, barely religious society; in a fourth, Olu Taiwo discusses the ‘ontology’ of the return-beat in Yoruba music; and in a fifth, Jim Cox examines the characteristics of indigenous religions in modern Zimbabwe.

In the musicological volume, three of the ten contributions are about music in African indigenous religions. Malcolm Floyd discusses its role in Maasai religion; Peter R. Cooke presents a magnificent case study, and recording of the music on the CD-Rom that goes with the book, of possession and healing in Busoga, Eastern Uganda; and Platvoet examines the ‘curing dances’ of the San in the Kalahari of

Namibia and Botswana, in which they chase off God and the deceased as unwanted aliens and source of evil.

In *Readings in Indigenous Religions*, published to 'widen and deepen debates initiated or developed in *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*' and to improve methodologies (1), sixteen texts are included which Harvey considers 'classic' (1) despite their very recent dates of publication: only one dates from 1960; three from the 1980s; and the other twelve are all published between 1992 and 2001. Three deal with indigenous religions in Africa. One is Margaret Thompson Drewal 1992 chapter, 'The Ontological Journey', from her book *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Indiana University Press), in which she examines Yoruba funeral rituals as an 'ontological journey' and criticises Eliade's notion of cyclical time. The other is Edith Turner's personal narrative of her part as a healer in a 1985 spirit possession, in which she, having been 'medicated', saw the *ihamba* (hunter spirit), which was to be exorcised from a patient, 'with my own eyes emerge out of the flesh of her back [as] a large grey blob about six inches across, opaque and something between solid and smoke' (162) and dissolve, while the main healer 'captured' it as a tooth (also *ihamba*) in a can. Edith Turner, widow of Victor Turner, pleads for an 'anthropology of experience'. She intends to engage in a 'dialogue with other anthropologists who have had such experiences in order to build up a reliable body of data on spirits' (164) as actually existing and medicines as actually working (165). The [53] third is another article by Berel Dov Lerner, in which he makes the same point as in his contribution to the earlier volume.

For lack of space, I must desist from indicating the wide range of studies of indigenous religions outside Africa. They too offer a wide variety of models, methodologies, and incite much debate, on how to study them in their most recent developments and contexts, and so are of great interest to scholars of religions, in Africa and elsewhere.

But I also have reservations, for Harvey, as editor, clearly also pursues his own agenda. He has a partisan interest in indigenous religions and modern neo-paganism. His purpose is to 'aid and abet' dialogue with them, promote 'joyous participation' in them, and engagement with the struggle of the First Nations of the Fourth World movement. Though many of the points he makes are historically and methodologically correct, he clearly pushes the 'new primitivist' approaches which Armin Geertz criticised.