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## Inventing God

James L. Cox 2014, *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies*. Durham: Acumen, x + 182 pp., ISBN 978-1-84465-754-4 (hbk), \$76.86; ISBN 978-1-84465-755-1 (pbk), \$24.05

*The Invention of Tradition*, 1983, by Hobsbawn & Ranger, has been the fountain-head of a rich river of research. This book is also inspired by it (pp. 6-9, 143-144). It investigates the invention of tradition, widespread in Africa and elsewhere in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that a Creator God like the Christian God had always been the central belief notion, and to a degree an object of worship, in indigenous religions in pre-colonial times.

By taking this 'invention of God' as his object of study, Cox joins another important, be it tiny research tradition in the study of the indigenous religions of Africa, that initiated by the Ugandan scholar of African indigenous religions, Okot p'Bitek (1-2, 9, 161). In his *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, 1972, he blasted his teachers in Anthropology at Oxford University and African theologians alike for Hellenizing and Christianizing the 'God' of the indigenous religions of Africa. As foremost did John Mbiti in his *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970) by endowing 'God' in over 300 indigenous religions in Africa with all the metaphysical trappings Christians theologians had invented in the course of centuries for their biblical God.

Though Cox examines but one African case, that of Mwari in Shona religion in Zimbabwe, this book is a must for African and Western scholars researching and/or teaching about the indigenous religions of Africa, and in particular about the histories of indigenous belief notions about 'God' from earliest contact with Christian beliefs till now. And it is so for two reasons.

One is that the book is an exercise in global comparison. Cox carefully examines four case histories, from earliest contact-time till now, of the Westernization, c.q.

Christianization, of presumed indigenous 'God' notions as widespread as New Zealand, Australia, Zimbabwe and Alaska. He demonstrates that all four have a very distinct history. Though they have in common that Western, c.q. Christian traits were imputed to a presumed indigenous 'high god' in all four, and though therefore such imputations have occurred, and continue to occur, worldwide, Cox insists that for reasons of methodology they must be studied as place-, time- and context-bound singularities in their own right rather than be subjected to the scissor-and-paste, de-contextualizing and Christianizing approach of e.g. Mbiti (2, 9). The four case histories outlined are that of Io in Maori religion in New Zealand (35-66, 138-139); of Mwari in Shona religion in Zimbabwe (67-88, 139-140); of the Rainbow Serpent in Australian Aboriginal Religion (89-111, 141-142); and of Elam Yua in Yupiit ('Eskimo/Inuit') religion in South-West Alaska (113-135, 142-143).

In the case of Io, Cox stresses the crucial role of Hoani Te Whatahoro Jury (1841-1923), a Maori Mormon convert, in the 'discovery' by Eldon Best and Percy Smith, amateur anthropologists and leaders of the Maori-ophile Polynesian Society, of Io as reputedly the ancient high god of Maori religion. Io had allegedly been hidden from ordinary Maori believers because his cult, and the belief that he had caused all the other gods to appear and had created everything, had been the esoteric preserve of a few learned Maori priests only (2, 36-44, 138). Despite stiff criticism of Io's presumed antiquity by Sir Peter Buck, Jonathan Z. Smith and Cox (53-66, 138-139), the strong pro-Io school (44-53) managed to gain its Io theology accepted by 'almost every student at secondary and tertiary level' by 2000 (52).

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

In Australia, Rainbow Spirit theology emerged even later, in the 1990s, when a group of Aboriginal Christian leaders, known as the Rainbow Spirit Elders, met in northern Queensland to indigenize Christian theology (2-3). The rainbow serpent, who features prominently in Aboriginal rock paintings and on whom much Anthropological research existed, part of which identified it as a bi-sexual fertility deity (90-99, 141-142), prefigured the incarnation of Christ, said the Rainbow Spirit Elders. And Christ, they said, is the rainbow serpent incarnated (104) and reveals the rainbow serpent's true nature as a life-giving Creator God of love who has withdrawn to the sky (105, 99-106, 141-142). Cox criticizes their invention as selective, romantic and de-contextualizing (106-110). He pleads that Aboriginal traditions be studied in their own right rather than as *preparatio evangelica* (110-111).

In Alaska, where indigenous religion had been thoroughly suppressed (113) by demonizing shamanism as communication with the devil (118, 133), missionaries, and in their train Alaskan Christian theologians, generally assumed that Eskimos never had had a notion of 'God' (3, 114-115, 127-133, 134, 142-143). That they did have one was asserted by two academics: Angayuqak Oscar Kawagley (1934-2011), associate professor of education at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks (116-120, 142); and the American anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan who has worked and lived in Yup'ik villages since the mid-1970s (120-123, 142). In their publications they established that Yupiit did believe in Elam Yua as the Spirit of the Universe (117) who took the form of Raven to create the world (120) and was ever watchful over it by *Elam linga*, its 'eye of awareness' (122-123, 133). They have inspired contemporary Yup'ik village Christians to indigenize that notion as resembling the Christian all-seeing God (3, 123-124, 133-135, 142-143) and to reassert the dignity of their original religion to the outside world (142). Which they did by organizing an exhibition of masks used in shamanic rituals, entitled *Agayuliyararput* ('Our Way of Making Prayer') that was shown in Tolsook Bay, Bethel and Anchorage in Alaska, and then in New York, Washington and Seattle (124-127, 142).

The other reason why I commend this book is that Cox provides an additional toolkit for studying inventions of traditions (9, 144-161). He suggests that we may analyse them, in post-colonial fashion, as cultural hybridizations, either of the organic/unintentional/unconscious/mute/opaque, or of the intentional/conscious/-contestatory kind, the latter an oblique strategy of the oppressed reversing oppres-

sion by adopting it: 'in our case: the appropriation of the Christian God as an indigenous deity' (146, 144-147). Applying these to Mwari as Creator God, Cox discerns intentional hybridization with Canaan Banana, political activists and indigenous theologians (149-150) and organic hybridization with the generality of Shona Christians (148-149).

In conclusion, three comments. One respects Cox's confidence that 'religion is always a communal and social affair: [... it] can never be [...] an entirely isolated experience' (5). I fear that the universal validity of this Durkheimian assertion is being disproved by the most recent developments in mankind's religious history, believers now shopping freely in the supermarkets of religion, East and West, old and new, and massively defecting from traditional communal religious rites in favour of loose, private spiritualities.

Secondly, contestatory hybridization is analytically helpful, but unintentional hybridization seems to shed little extra light.

Lastly, 'the invention of God' organizes the case histories inevitably into a rather rigid opposition between the seemingly unaffected notions of 'God' of indigenous religions in 'pre-contact time', before they were exposed to the full force of Christian missions through schools, etc., and those in 20<sup>th</sup> century indigenous Christian communities '(re-)inventing' those 'pure' pre-contact indigenous notion of God. I suggest we need additional long-term studies of what subtle shifts had already occurred in beliefs about 'God' in 'pre-contact' African indigenous religions due to the incidental encounters with notions of God of e.g. Muslim and/or Christian traders in pre-colonial times, often for centuries. Indigenous religions being adoptive and adaptive, some notions foreign to e.g. Mwari as sky/rain/fertility god may have already been haphazardly added through such limited encounters, laying the groundwork for the rapid transformation of Mwari from sky god to Creator God in heaven in the heads of Shona, 'pagan' and convert, in early contact time. Such research findings will further exculpate unintentional hybridizations. But their special merit will be that they provide us with dynamic, complex histories how the notion of God in (some) African indigenous religions was transformed gradually in the past few centuries from a sky god who is not considered creator, to the Creator God in heaven after the biblical model.