

The Study of Religions in Africa Past, Present and Prospects

edited by
Jan Platvoet,
James Cox and Jacob Olupona

being volume one in the series
Religions of Africa

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FOREWORD TO THE SERIES

In view of the serious problem of book famine in Africa, publications issues have been given high priority in the initial stages of building up the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR). After its foundation at the regional conference of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in Harare in September 1992, one of the first decisions taken was to form a publications sub-committee. This committee has launched a book series of first-rate studies on 'Religions of Africa'. In 1995, two editors, Jacob K. Olupona and David Westerlund, and an editorial advisory board of ten scholars representing various disciplines and continents, were appointed for a first period of five years.

'Religions of Africa' is open for scholarly contributions on indigenous or traditional African religions, Christianity and Islam, as well as for studies on minority religions such as Bahaism, Hinduism and Judaism. Volumes on religions of African origin in other continents may also be published in it. The series aims at maintaining a wide range of scholarly approaches. It is primarily, but not exclusively, intended for African scholars. Special attempts are also made to encourage and assist young and promising academics. The main language is English, but it is possible to include books written in French too. Volumes in the series are published in cooperation with publishers in various continents. In addition to supporting scholars in terms of publishing manuscripts, the AASR aims to contribute substantially to the distribution of these books in Africa.

We are delighted to start the Religions of Africa series with the present volume, based on papers that were presented at the Harare conference of 1992. We hope that it will be followed by many inspiring and important works on the rich religious heritage of Africa.

PREFACE

This book embodies three memorable events. The first event embodied was the conference on the Study of Religions in Africa organized by the International Association for the History of Religions and (IAHR) held in the University of Zimbabwe at Harare in September 1992. It was the first ever IAHR conference in Africa, and the first ever on this subject. The second event was that the 'Iron Curtain' of apartheid, which had separated scholars of religions in South Africa from those in the rest of Africa and the world at large, effectively fell for the study of religions in Southern Africa at this conference. The President of the Association for the Study of Religions of Southern Africa (ASRSA), Prof. Kobus Krüger, celebrated this liberation in a moving speech in the opening session of the conference. The third event was the emergence of African academic study of religions onto the global scene as an organized force, for the 'Harare conference' was concluded by the foundation by those present of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR). Thus, the academic reality which this book expresses is that the study of the religions of Africa in the universities of Africa has matured and is effectively entering, together with scholars of African religions in the rest of the world, the global scene of international scholarship of the religions of humankind. This book assists the constitution of this reality by taking stock of the development of the academic study of religions in the universities of sub-Saharan Africa, with particular reference to English speaking regions. In addition, it contains contributions by leading African scholars on the varieties of the religions of Africa, especially those that are hardly recognized as African traditions, such as Judaism and Hinduism.

The editors wish to thank the University of Zimbabwe, in particular its Department of Religious Studies, Classics & Philosophy and its chair person, Dr. Ephraim Mandivenga, for the warm hospitality extended to the participants during the conference. We fondly remember Mount Pleasant as well as Ngoma Kurira, the 'wailing mountain', to which we had an adventurous outing. The editors are also greatly indebted to the Executive Boards of the IAHR, the ASRSA and the AASR for their support in the preparation of the conference and in the financing and distribution of this book. We are also happy to announce that this book could be listed as volume 1 in the AASR series 'The religions of Africa'. We hope it will be followed by many inspiring works on African religions by scholars from Africa. Lastly, we should like to thank Dr. David Westerlund for special assistance in the publication arrangements for this book.

Gordon L. Chavunduka
Vice-Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe

WELCOMING SPEECH

On behalf of the University of Zimbabwe, I welcome the participants to this historic Regional Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions, its first ever on the continent of Africa. The University of Zimbabwe is happy to contribute to the policy of internationalisation which the IAHR has pursued vigorously since 1985. The theme of this conference, the study of religions in Africa, is significant and we hope that its setting in Zimbabwe will contribute to the general goals of the meeting.

Almost twenty years ago, at the Study Conference of the IAHR at Turku in Finland in 1973, Lauri Honko outlined the benefit of conferences such as this one for the academic community. He noted that teaching, fieldwork, and the writing of books form three parts of a scholar's life, with attendance at conferences a fourth. In fact, at conferences, he observed, the research community takes shape in reaction to situations, topics, or to each other in creative, critical and unique ways.¹

On the issues surrounding the study of religions in Africa, the forming of the research community takes on a special significance as members of the IAHR reflect critically on the nature and experience of religious traditions on this continent. This reflection is aided by the truly international composition of this conference with scholars from Africa, Europe and America. It is significant in this regard that twenty-five of the forty-one participants hold posts in African universities. I am especially pleased that ten of these come from the University of Zimbabwe and that six of the papers to be presented during the deliberations have been developed by members of staff of this university. This demonstrates a genuine commitment on the part of the IAHR to achieve its goal of internationalization by building a research community based on reciprocal relationships between the various regions of the globe.

I personally hold a strong interest in the proceedings of this conference and look forward to the findings, which should inform my own academic research and practical involvement in the Zimbabwe Traditional Healers' Association. Were it not for the workload with which I currently find myself burdened as Vice-Chancellor, I would have liked to be a participant myself.

Nonetheless, I anticipate that this occasion will generate fresh ideas, that it will promote innovative research projects, and that it will solidify the role of the IAHR in Africa. I am pleased that the University is able to assist in meeting these goals and thus wish all who participate productive and creative sessions.

1. Honko 1979: xx-xxi.

References

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