

OCMS

RELIGION IN AFRICA: a series of three lectures

August 30 2005:

Lecture One: AFRICAN RELIGION

(1) The word 'Religion' does not exist in any African language and some writers speak of the 'invention of African religion' as a distinct sphere.

Reading:

Paul Landau, ' "Religion" and Christian Conversion in African History', *Journal of Religious History*, 23, 1999.

V.Y.Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, Indiana, 1988.

Benjamin Ray, *African Religions. Symbol, Ritual and Community*, Prentice Hall, 1999.

(2) So what are the implications of 'inventing' African Religion, i.e. separating out the 'religious' from the 'secular'?

Missionaries had said there was no such thing as African religion. So African theologians wanted to find an African religion in which there was an idea of God as omnipotent, omniscient, etc – an African religion with the characteristics of other religions. Others saw this as making African culture subordinate to Christianity in another way.

Reading:

John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann 1990 (originally 1969)

Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, Kampala, 1970.

(3) If this strategy does not work how to replace it? One long established way is in terms of 'comparative religion'. Studies of southern African 'religions' were very important to the rise of Comparative religion in Europe. The problem was that comparison tended to place African religions as an early phase of human religiosity, as 'primal' if not 'primitive'. Yet they are fully historical and dynamic.

Reading

David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, University of Virginia, 1996.

J.V.Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, SCM, 2001 (originally 1963).

(4) If neither of these strategies work another approach is to accept the boundlessness of African religion, seeing it as infusing everything, as central to culture and politics. It is in this sense that people talk of Africans as 'incurably religious' because they have not partitioned off the secular and the scientific from the spirit. Even J.D.Y.Peel in his wonderful *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, Indiana, 2000, refuses to talk about Yoruba 'religion' and uses the expression 'country fashion' instead. His discussion is mainly in terms of power. Even more so are recent attempts to show that African politics are still profoundly 'religious'. These tend to emphasise the instrumental dimensions of AR at the expense of its social and spiritual dimensions.

Reading

Stephen Ellis and Gerrit te Haar, *Worlds of Power. Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, Hurst, 2004.

(5) This strategy comes close to the old missionary practice of lumping everything in Africa together under the heading of witchcraft, and calling everyone – prophet, diviner, healer, rain-maker, witch-finder, witch – by the single name 'witch-doctor'. This approach is alive and well – as one can see by the very recent responses to the BBC African Service questions of 'witchcraft'. But this is very distorting because it fails to make vital distinctions between negative and positive religion. It often also implies that 'witch-craft' is primordial and impossible to eradicate in Africa. There is in fact an important new literature about the dynamism and modernity of witchcraft belief, and also about how the concept of evil has changed in Africa.

Reading

Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Post-Colonial Africa*, Charlottesville, 1995.

Bigit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*, Edinburgh, 1999.

Isaac Niehaus, editor, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics. Exploring the Occult in the South African lowveld*, Pluto, 2001

Gerrit Te Haar, ed., *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft beliefs and accusations in contemporary Africa*, Trenton, 2005.

(6) So how can one make the necessary distinctions between 'religion' and 'witchcraft' and between 'power' and 'healing' without creating an invented African Religion?_ Long ago Isaria Kimambo and I suggested an approach in *The Historical Study of African Religion*, Heinemann, 1972, which I still think has potential. Basically this was to break down 'African religion' not into 'tribal religions', as Mbiti does, but into institutions, movements and cults some of which spread over many ethnic groups. One can study the history of rain-shrines, prophetic cults, anti-witchcraft movements, possession cults, spirit mediums, secret societies etc, etc. Thereafter one can re-assemble a comprehensive social, political and cultural history which includes them.

Reading

My own 'model' of the dynamics of African religion is:

T.O. Ranger, 'African Traditional Religion' in Stewart Sutherland and Peter Clarke, eds., *The Study of Religion*, Routledge, 1991.

My account of its scale is:

'The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History' in Robert Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity*, UCP, 1993.

Studies of prophets, spirit possession, territorial and environmental cults, etc published since *THSAR* are:

David Anderson and Douglas Johnson, eds., *Revealing Prophets. Prophecy in East African History*, Ohio University Press, 1995.

Heike Behrend and Ute Luig, *Spirit Possession, Modernity and Power in Africa*, James Currey, 1999.

G.Maddox, J.Giblin and I.N.Kimambo, eds., *Custodians of the Land. Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania*, James Currey, 1996.

J.M.Schofeleers, ed., *Guardians of the Land: Essays on Central African Territorial Cults*, Gweru, 1978.

J.M.Schofeleers, *River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult*, Maddison, 1992.

Some of my own further work on African religion is:

On prophets and disease, 'Plagues of beasts and men: prophetic responses to epidemic in eastern and southern Africa' in Terence Ranger and Paul Slack, eds., *Epidemics and Ideas*, CUP, 1992.

on gender and environment, 'Women and Environment in African Religion: the case of Zimbabwe' in W.Beinart and J.McGregor, eds., James Currey, 2003.

and my attempt to put religious history back into total history, *Voices From the Rocks. Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos*, James Currey, 1999.

For a different OCMS view:

Ben Knighton, *The Vitality of Karamojong Religion*, Ashgate, 2005.

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