

BOOK REVIEWS

Rational Ancestors: Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions By James L. Cox. Cardiff Academic Press, Cardiff, 1998, 265 pages, ISBN 1899025-081.

The study of African traditional religions has generated lively debates over a number of issues. In this book, the author revisits themes that have engaged scholars in religious studies, such as theories pertaining to myths and rituals. Cox provides illuminating discussions of these phenomena of religion, while articulating the methodological problems which they pose. Cognisant of the limitations of hasty generalisation, he endeavours to confine his examples to the Zimbabwean context. Aware of his location as an 'outsider'¹ Cox concludes by inviting African scholars: 'New understandings of African religions, nevertheless, await a full application of the method (diatopical hermeneutics) by those whose horizons are transparently African' (p. 147). Cox analyses the problem of terminology, the issue of orality, theories undergirding the study of myths and rituals, and engages in methodological reflections. The second and third parts of the book comprise of myths and rituals provided by University of Zimbabwe students of 1991 and 1992.

Dr Cox demonstrates his familiarity with methodological issues in the study of African traditional religions, as well as the general nature of Zimbabwean indigenous religions. However, his offer of diatopical hermeneutics as 'a way forward' in the study of African traditional religions may not go down well with those scholars espousing a strictly historical or 'scientific' approach. That more remains to be done in this area should facilitate further reflections on method. In addition, the disengagement of myths from rituals (pp. 80-81) needs considerable discussion as 'Eliadean scholars' may provide examples of how the two are constantly conjoined. However, Cox's discussion of mythologumena provides valuable new insights. The observation that 'the meaning of the mythologumena will often differ according to the circumstances, the story teller, and the purpose of telling the story' (p. 101) challenges the tendency to regard myths as canonical. In addition, the fixation with cosmogonic myths or myths of origin is checked (p. 114).

Questions will be raised over the second half of the book. While the idea of giving undergraduate African students a 'voice' is a noble one, it is

1. D. Westerlund, "Insiders" and "outsiders" in the study of African religions: Notes on some problems of theory and method', in J. K. Olupona (ed.), *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (New York, Paragon House, 1991), 15-24; and S. T. Kgatla, 'The perspectives of "undersiders" and "topsidiers" on African religions: Notes on methodological approaches', *Missionalia*, (1997), XXX, (iv), 633-646.

not without problems. Applying a hermeneutic of suspicion, first-year students, or even third- and fourth-year students (p. 2) faced with an assignment are not likely to return from the 'field' with empty hands. The author detects that 'for many students this was the first traditional African ritual they had ever observed' (p. 4). The absence of a research context and the inexperience of freshers militate against their efforts. For those steeped in the indigenous traditions, some of the descriptions assume a superficial character. At the risk of sounding elitist, I am more comfortable with the descriptions by the author himself (cf pp. 87-89 and 142-144) and the availability of a postgraduate student (p. 4). However, given that African scholars have always complained about the 'silencing' of informants, debate will rage over who is best placed to describe and interpret African traditional religions. This admission notwithstanding, a reader gets the impression that since the conclusion has already been reached (p. 147), these numerous stories and descriptions constitute an addendum.

To sense the complexities of method in the study of African traditional religions, a reading of this book is helpful. Accurate spelling and translation of vernacular concepts, as well as the application of a clear writing style make the book quite readable. It will interest anthropologists, religionists, students and any reader keen on the indigenous religions of Zimbabwe. Above all, it should inspire local scholars to take up the challenge thrown at them by Cox.

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Caves, Monuments and Texts: Zimbabwean Archaeology Today Edited by Gilbert Pwiti. Uppsala University, Sweden, 1997, 159 pp.

Dr. Pwiti has provided a welcome overview of current interests in Zimbabwean archaeology, with seven co-contributors who are all active in archaeological research in Zimbabwe or immediately adjacent countries. The book is well written, coherent and produced to a high standard. One hopes that it is widely available in Zimbabwe at an affordable price. It is reasonable to assume that the book fairly reflects the current balance of research interest in the subject which it covers. Of eight chapters, one deals with the Stone Age, one with rock art and six with what may, for want of a better term, be called the Iron Age.

The Stone Age chapter, by Nicholas Walker and Carolyn Thorp, is a concise but business-like survey of current knowledge. The authors eschew speculation and provide a basic outline of the subject which serves to emphasise how little is actually understood. Peter Garlake's essay 'The