

BOOK REVIEWS

Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction Between Christian and African Traditional Religions Edited by James L. Cox. Cardiff Academic Press, 1998, 246 pp.

The contributions to this edited volume were first presented at a conference held in Harare in 1994, where the theme was the ritual interaction between the Christian and indigenous African religions, with a particular emphasis given to rites of passage. A notable absence from this collection is the paper given by the keynote speaker who, doubtless, was among those who 'preferred to have their papers appear elsewhere'. It is mildly surprising therefore to find that, prior to their inclusion in this volume, virtually half of the contributions had appeared in published form elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, in a compilation of this kind, the pieces vary greatly in quality and in coherence with the stated theme. The geographical spread of interest includes Kenya, Mozambique and Nigeria but, corresponding to the regional thrust of the conference, the heaviest concentration is on Malawi and Zimbabwe. Virtually all the pieces are written from the standpoint of a Christian concern with enculturation or Africanisation.

The editor arranges the papers in three sections: (1) Ritual interaction between Christian and traditional practices, (2) The High God, (3) Life cycle rituals. For purposes of this review, I prefer to follow my own tripartite division of the papers into (1) those that do not deal with ritual transition at all, (2) those that do, but fail to broach the issue of ritual adaptation or enculturation, (3) those that are concerned with the Africanisation of Christianity through the purposive adoption of the traditional rite of passage, either in whole or in part. This division does not imply a hierarchy of worth and is no reflection on the intrinsic merit or otherwise of each of the papers. Thus, Daneel in the masterly style we have come to expect from him and based in part on first-hand observation and experience, ably demonstrates the oracular support given by the Mwari cult to three phases of 'liberation struggle' in Zimbabwe. Good as it is, the paper has no bearing on transition ritual. One hoped, ultimately in vain, for some insightful attempt to employ 'rite of passage' as a metaphor for 'liberation struggle'.

The others in this category are marginally concerned with ritual transition but are really interested in something else, Africanisation in different churches (Cruz E. Silva and Leforte), charismatic teaching about marriage as a way of life and not as a ritual (Ojo), dialogue about the beliefs behind funerary rites (Ongang'a).

In the second category, Ntoi provides a substantial ethnographic and analytical treatment of the rite of initiation for mediums of the Mwari cult, but his claim that 'significant similarities' exist between this and the baptismal rite in certain churches is taken no further. Thompson makes ingenious use of rather thin historical data from the 19th century to indicate how Africans may have been substituting a Christian rite for the defunct 'first-fruits' ceremony, but he can supply no evidence whatsoever for his further claim that the substitution provided new meaningful rites of passage for Africans.

Two papers (M'Passou, Chingota) skim rather lightly over the historical surface of early missionary rejection of indigenous initiation rites, followed by enforced acceptance or a bungled attempt to devise a Christian alternative. The best piece in this third category and possibly in the whole book is by Fiedler who, arguing from personal experience as a missionary in Zaire/Congo, constructs a hard-hitting argument for the abolition of the Christian rite of marriage. Refreshingly, he confronts what is a serious real-life problem for millions of African Christians today. Paradoxically, in an enlightened move, early missionaries made Christian marriage conditional upon the full transfer of bridewealth, which was definitive of African marriage. But no further adaptation was made to changing economic circumstances, that made the finalisation of such payments too burdensome and costly to fulfil. Secondly, the marriage reception began to assume such lavish proportions that it became a status statement beyond the means of all but the very wealthy. Thirdly, since Christian marriage was a prerequisite for ordination and only the ordained qualified to be marriage officers entitled to a fee, the result was the introduction of a class division among the clergy. In practice, 'the rite of marriage has become a status symbol for the laity and a major element in ecclesiastical power structures' (p. 956). Strong stuff.

A feminist perspective on female initiation is presented by Phiri (Malawi) and Hinga (Kenya), the first being stronger on rhetoric than argument. Both decry the abuse of women in the traditional rite, nowadays greatly modified (though the larger issue of social repression remains), and advocate the introduction of a sanitised Christianised alternative or one compatible with morality and modernity. Neither one has any suggestions about how to go about it, though Hinga rightly asserts that the work of reconstruction is for women themselves to do.

The final brace of papers to be considered commonly address the efforts of the Catholic church to reach some accommodation with African rites of transition — puberty rites in Malawi (Chakanza) and the rite of transition to ancestral status among the Shona (Gundani). Both are substantial well researched pieces. The Malawian case is a history of several failed attempts at providing a Catholic rite of transition, each

abandoned because of alleged abuses, though Chakanza lists several other sources of Catholic resistance. He takes a theological stand in favour of renewed inculturation and, like Hinga and Phiri, takes liberation rather than oppression to be the high road to acceptability. Gundani also takes the historical approach, following good groundwork on the character and meaning of the indigenous rite, which demonstrates its complexity. There are in fact multiple statuses in transition, not just that of the deceased person, to be catered for. This may account for the cautious and tortuous Catholic deliberations on the issue over a period of 18 years that eventually produced a model rite, complete with a set of operating instructions, but with at least one contentious matter outstanding. It appears however, that the majority of the laity are not sufficiently informed about the new rite. In other words, they continue to make their own compromises with tradition.

This last observation strikes an ominous note for the volume as a whole. That theologians and academic specialists in religion should be wrestling with the problem of integrating two separate religious traditions is to be expected and this effort is no better or worse than others of its kind. But there is a missing dimension, that of everyday life — what lies beyond the standard statements provided by informants, as Bourdillon points out in the epilogue. To what extent are the two religious systems separate, or rather, in whose mind(s) are they deemed to be divided from one another? It tends to be a middle-class urban concern to lace them together in some formal way, precisely because their disjunction is largely conceived by the urban middle class. Ordinary people on the ground have little time for theological niceties and, in their everyday practice and interaction, they readily integrate the two to form a single system. It is this living conjunction, the articulation of a dynamic folk-religion, that is largely absent from these pages and that bears further investigation.

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Images of Yesteryear: Film-making in Central Africa *By Louis Nell.* Harper Collins, 1998, ISBN 1-77904005-9, 206 pp.

Louis Nell's book provides a first hand account of pioneering film-making in Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland through the Central African Film Unit (CAFU) over the fifteen-year period 1948-63. In that time 625 films were made. Initial support for the CAFU project came from the British government through the Colonial Development welfare funds.