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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 Zaïre/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.

England's ruling elite had great faith in the power of cinema as an instrument of persuasion when communicating with the masses, whether the working class of urban industrial England or illiterates in Britain's African colonies.¹

The original objective of CAFU was to make films for African audiences. With the establishment of the Central African Federation in 1953, control of CAFU was assumed by the Federal Department of Information and the priorities shifted to the making of propaganda and publicity films to promote the federation locally and overseas.²

The author, Louis Nell, was appointed to CAFU as a director-cameraman, being part of the CAFU team made up of Allan Izod (producer), Denys Brown (cameraman), and Stephen Peet (director-cameraman). Nell's work primarily covered Zambia, but also Malawi and Zimbabwe. His book is the first comprehensive account of CAFU activities produced by one of the participants. It therefore fills an important gap in the historiography of film-making in Central Africa.

The book provides important information on the technology of film-making in the 1950s. The work was primarily based on small budgets and individual enterprise. CAFU laid the groundwork for modern day film production in Zimbabwe. Sadly, some of the gains of the pre-independence era such as the development of the Central Film Laboratories (CFL) have been lost. The CFL went out of business because of a failure to upgrade its facilities. The country has therefore not been able to build on the pioneering base of knowledge, skills and facilities established during the colonial period.

CAFU films were made during an era where the majority African population was discriminated against socially, economically and politically. These problems were played out in the work activities of the unit. Oral interviews with African participants who worked for CAFU, and archival materials, have shown that film-making by CAFU was in some ways uplifting to local communities, particularly the use of instructional films. The audiences embraced them when they judged them to be consistent with their social and economic aspirations. However, there is evidence that CAFU activities were resisted by local communities, who challenged the political assumptions on which they were based. There is evidence that Africans in Northern Rhodesia became openly hostile to CAFU films that promoted the Central African Federation which they considered to be detrimental to their political aspirations for self-

1 R. Smyth (1998) 'The British Colonial Film Unit and Sub-Saharan Africa', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 8, (iii), 285.

2 R. Smyth (1983) 'The Central African Film Unit's images of empire, 1948-1963', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 3, (ii).

determination.³ Interviews that I have conducted with African assistants to CAFU crews have indicated that rural audiences resisted some CAFU films that promoted land resettlement policies and the re-location of African peasant farmers in support of the Land Apportionment Act.⁴ A third area of difficulty for CAFU were the controls imposed by the state on the production and marketing of crops. There were selective bans on cash crop production of some commodities (e.g. Tobacco in Southern Rhodesia) and discriminatory commodity pricing policies. These rash policies were intended to promote White agriculture against African competition. Given these policies, CAFU films that promoted enterprise and wealth accumulation through hard work ran into obvious contradictions that the audience came to increasingly discern.

There is hardly a hint of these difficulties in Nell's account. He chooses to be largely detached from the political context of his work. The furthest he gets addressing these problems is to comment vaguely that, 'people were openly beginning to show hostility to anything federal'.⁵ But when he says that, the example that he goes on to cite is that of campaigns against the federal health system, rather than CAFU activities. This is unfortunate, as a more deliberate engagement of the problem of film-making in the colonial context would have enriched his narrative. Such an account was all the more necessary because the professed goal of the unit was to promote African development, particularly rural Africans. This goal became increasingly elusive because of discriminatory land tenure policies that relegated African farming to marginal and overcrowded land. Peter Fraenkel's book on the development of early radio in Zambia is an outstanding example of a narrative that fully engages the problem of mass media in the political context of the region during the same period as is covered by Nell. Commenting on the problems of radio broadcasting in Northern Rhodesia during the federal period he notes that:

The faith that our audiences had once had in our broadcasting station slowly collapsed completely. Our announcers were threatened. Our recording-vans had their tyres punctured in remote villages. People refused to record for us. If they could be persuaded to do so, many of their songs had the refrain, 'We don't want the Federation.' We had reached rock-bottom.⁶

3 Interview with David Hlazo, 1987. Hlazo worked as an assistant to CAFU crews in Zambia. All the interviews cited were conducted by Dr. K. Manungo and myself, unless otherwise stated.

4 The Land Apportionment Act of 1930 was a cornerstone of colonial discriminatory policies. It allocated land on the basis of race and provided the legal framework for the forced eviction of Africans from areas designated for White settlement by the state.

5 L. Nell, *Images of Yesterday: Film-making in Central Africa*, 187.

6 See Peter Fraenkel's *Wayalashi* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959), 207.

It would have been useful to dwell on the broader social problems of film producing over the period under review. Nell however, chose to confine his discussion of audience reaction to episodes where receptions were enthusiastic and audiences were entranced by the magic of the 'moving images'. Ultimately CAFU was a White run organization that sought to promote a limited vision of African development in a segregated society. Nell defends the absence of Africans in CAFU's decision-making structures citing the absence of suitably qualified Africans. It is not clear why he is motivated to such a defence, when it is patently clear that the racial politics of that era would not have allowed Africans to be trained in film-making. That there were Africans who could have been co-opted and trained as film-makers is evidenced by recent oral interviews with former CAFU 'African assistants', David Hlazo and Samuel Tutani.⁷ Both had good academic qualifications, having received at least four years of secondary education. They could have been taken on as trainee director-cameramen or scriptwriters. Indeed there is evidence from interviews with Stephen Peet⁸ that African assistants were sometimes asked to do camera work, but this was not officially acknowledged. The bottom line is that CAFU never considered such positions as open to Africans, which was consistent with the politics of the day. The failure to open up film-making for Africans created problems for CAFU that were inherent in the colonial government's native policy. In the end, as the political tensions rose, leading to the break-up of the federation and UDI, CAFU lost some of its staff through emigration, and those who remained were largely absorbed by the Rhodesian government as part of its propaganda machine.

The shortcomings in Nell's account notwithstanding, his book is an important account of the history of film-making in Zimbabwe.

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The ZAPU and ZANU Guerrilla Warfare and The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe By *Ngwabi Bhebe*. Mambo Press, 1999.

I read this book on Heroes Day, when the leaders of the liberation struggle were expecting the masses to gather at Heroes Acre, a monument for the dead built by the Koreans in the outskirts of Harare. Bhebe's book is of interest to read today as an important addition to stories about the liberation struggle by Africans. One hears about ZANU, ZAPU and/or

⁷ Interviews with David Hlazo, 1987 and Interview with Samuel Tutani, 1988.

⁸ Interview with Stephen Peet, 1987.

ZIPRA from different angles. Shona religion furthers our understanding of the struggle, says Lan; yes, that and the peasants, says Ranger; the Catholic Church too, argues Sr. Janice MacLoughlin; the Methodists maintains Banana; now the Lutherans; and another book is on the way shedding some light on the role of women in the struggle.

Bhebe accuses the Rhodesian army of using British tactics of going behind enemy lines with 'a vast war machine, which apart from performing the normal military operations against freedom fighters . . . caused untold suffering through huge losses of lives, physical torture, psychological terror and the destruction of property' (p. 114). Bhebe calls ZAPU 'her' who 'affected the south-western part of the country through her massive recruitment programme rather than her military activities' (p. 116). I started to wonder if the book which I was reading is also meant to be on the Evangelical Lutheran Church introduced among the Africans in the central and south-eastern part of Zimbabwe by European missionaries from Sweden. Apart from the introduction, the first part of Bhebe's book is on war tactics and accordingly the language is militaristic.

Chapter 3 takes the reader back to religious matters with which Bhebe begins the book. This time, he draws attention to the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe whose participation in the war for independence Bhebe claims to understand in depth. He calls himself one of the 'radical pastors' who 'wanted to make sure that people understood that what the Europeans were trying to agree among themselves was not good for the Africans' (p. 158). This book will confirm that it was not just an academic career, but also a desire to fight oppression as necessary through the teaching of history while others held the guns. Bhebe took his part in the revolution through 'scientific socialism' with a strong religious twist, unlike traditional Leninist-Marxism and Chinese Communism. As Bhebe puts it, the fight against the Smith regime was not anti-religious (p. 280).

The meaning of 'scientific socialism' is stretched beyond recognition in Zimbabwean history. As Bhebe himself knows, the high god Mwari, spirit mediums, Roman Catholics, Methodists, and other churches joined the conflict against the Ian Smith regime. As for the Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, it is distinguished in Bhebe's mind by two factors; a predominant African membership and something he calls 'a regional orientation' (p. 124). Surely, this can be said of all missionary founded Churches. Following Hallencreutz (misspelled as 'Hallencreautz' at least three times, p. 124), Bhebe maintains that the Lutheran Church was unlike the 'national' Catholic and Anglican churches, 'often dogged by immense division and disagreements' especially among its leaders. The Lutheran Church is presented as a church which had a large membership from rural areas and, therefore, was quick to adopt 'a critical stand against the Rhodesian racialist policies'. The Lutherans thus joined the

general rubric of 'revolutionary' and 'anti-colonial democratic forces'. Bhebe does not quite explain why Lutherans were not dogged by their own divisions and disagreements, since Europeans led that Church like all other recognized missionary founded churches of the time (p. 130). The first African Bishop in the Lutheran Church was elected as late as 1974. Why did the Bishop Strandvik stay on as leader of a church with a predominantly African membership known to have existed since the 1920s if the colonial and racist policies for missionary establishments did not apply to him? Bishop Shiri's rise to the leadership of the Lutheran Church as late as he did is quite plausible. The seventies was a time of awakening for the churches established by missionaries, hence the rise of other leaders such as the Methodists, Banana and Muzorewa and the Roman Catholic, Chakaipa in a country being forced to confront racism by an escalating war. Moreover, the Whites constituted such a thin layer of the population of Rhodesia that most, if not all churches in Zimbabwe, can be said to have had a predominantly African membership among whom anti-colonial attitudes had gained currency.

According to Bhebe, in the midlands 'people were desperate through economic hardship' owing to erratic rains, frequent droughts and famine. This is interesting. However, with or without this regional problem, there were many reasons for people to aspire for independence from a regime whose illegal status led to widespread sanctions by countries abroad. As a theologian, I hoped to come across some discussion of the way Lutheran evangelicalism made an impact on ZAPU and ZANU. Instead, Bhebe talks about how the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) supported the liberation groups with Swedish Crooners. One learns that the Swedes were selective about the use of their money. It was to be spent on refugees after the 'shattering and shocking experience of the abduction of school children' to camps set up by the guerrillas in Zambia, Mozambique and Botswana. Children had become refugees in need of clothing, food, household utensils, shelter, bedding, medical drugs, equipment and instruments, the things for which SIDA hoped its funds would be spent (p. 253). The Crooners were thus meant for the relief of unjustifiable suffering of children and not for the organization for military battle against the Rhodesians, with which Bhebe is preoccupied for most of the book. Mugabe's statement is useful, 'We cannot ask you for arms but for humanitarian assistance and we are grateful for that.' In my opinion, such humanitarian assistance would have passed with most Christian organizations. Bhebe could have discussed this in greater depth to help us appreciate the significance of the Lutheran approach to the struggle.

Finally, Bhebe's book raises the same questions about the 'scientific socialism' referred to by the leaders of the struggle for independence. No

doubt what he says fits into the general picture of missions in the history of Zimbabwe. Given the way the Lutherans are made to appear, the Church whose missionaries were quick to take sides with the freedom fighters, one wishes Bhebe spent more time on the religious factors in the European background culture of the Swedes which distinguished them.

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I. MUKONYORA

African Earthkeepers, Volume 1, Interfaith Mission in Earth-Care By *M. L. Daneel*. Pretoria, University of South Africa, 1998.

This is a remarkable book, about an attempt to save the environment by traditional religious leaders in Masvingo District of Zimbabwe. A second volume is envisaged, which will focus on the role of independent churches in the same endeavour.

The author is central to the endeavour. Although he is descended from White missionaries, he was brought up in Masvingo District and has maintained close links with the peoples of the district, recently through many years working with Independent Churches and helping them to establish an organisation for co-operation between them and with other churches. Daneel describes the sadness he felt at noticing how the forests he knew in his childhood had become depleted, and how he observed the land, denuded of trees, going to waste after the war for the independence of Zimbabwe.

The book begins with a brief account of the war, pointing to the documented roles of spirit mediums, of the cult of the High God Mwari, and of other traditional leaders. Traditional chiefs and spirit mediums lost influence immediately after the war as the new governing party took over control. Daneel links the loss of respect for traditional religious leaders and traditional religious values with indiscriminate ravaging of forests in the land.

The author describes how three associated organizations were established by religious leaders to focus on the natural environment, and to revive the woodlands by planting trees. The Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists involved traditional leaders; the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches involved independent churches; and the Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation incorporated other churches. Using a narrative style that includes his own involvement, the author describes how interest arose in these various groups and how the organizations developed. Included in his description

Is some account of rivalries and divisions that hindered the development of the movements.

The book goes on to examine in some detail how ecology fits in to traditional religious values, and how traditional religious leaders encouraged a campaign of afforestation. "Earth-clothing" ceremonies to initiate tree-planting derived their symbolism from two sources.

One was the war for the liberation of Zimbabwe. Then as now, a common enemy united people from different chiefdoms and different spirit domains, to transform religious leadership from the local to a national level. This is illustrated by the involvement of ministers of the national government. The movement was explicitly proclaimed a war of the trees. The spirit mediums and other leaders of the movement reminded people of their role in the war. This symbolism helped people to unite behind their religious leaders, as they had done in the war of liberation.

The second source of symbols is the traditional veneration of ancestors, who own the land and care for its fertility. Earth-clothing rituals followed the patterns of more ancient rituals in honour of the spirits of the land. In these, spirit mediums provide the link between the ancestors and the living community. Daneel describes the involvement of the cult of Mwari, the High God, which supported the new ecological movement. The book contains sections on traditional use of trees and the symbolism surrounding them, and a section on wild animals, again paying attention to the relationship between traditional values and current ecological issues.

The war of the trees has been effective in two principal ways. It revived the value of traditional sacred groves, which had been violated in recent years. These provide reserves in which hunting is prohibited and trees may not be cut down. The movement also gave a sacred character to the planting of trees and the new woodlots created. It ensured maximum participation of the people in the programme of afforestation.

The author makes clear his own interest and participation. Chapter Five indicates his wider initiatives in encouraging co-operation between White commercial game farmers and the local communities with respect to the utilisation of wildlife resources. This chapter also points to encouraging more general environmental awareness in schools and elsewhere. Always the campaign was linked to traditional values.

In the final reflective chapter, the author speaks of his own home background at Morgenster Mission, which established his links with the people and their concerns. He speaks of the need to step back from the values of the enlightenment, and to pay attention to religious values, which have close links with our environment. The contents of the book illustrate the role religion can play in material development. The author also reflects on aspects of Christian theology, arguing for areas of co-

operation and understanding between Christianity and African traditional religions.

The place of the book in academic literature is problematic, which is one of the things that makes it interesting and valuable. It bridges the disciplines of Religious Studies, Social Anthropology and Theology. Although it abounds in rich, descriptive detail, the book is not simply a descriptive account of the use of symbols, such as an anthropologist might provide. The author was active in developing symbols from the past to meet a new problematic situation. We see him taking on the role of indigenous theologian. It is not always clear precisely how influential he was in developing the new religious symbolism. But this does not matter: his links with, and commitment to, the people and country makes him a participant in a way that anthropologists rarely achieve.

This book should appeal to a wide readership. It is well written and well presented with illustrations and an index. It provokes reflection on important religious and material issues that face many African communities.

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PROFESSOR M. F. C. BOURDILLON