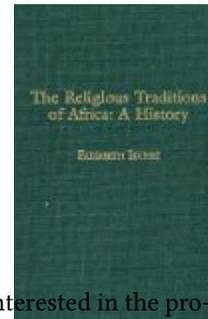


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Isichei. *The Religious Traditions of Africa: A History*. Westport: Praeger, 2004. xii + 409 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-325-07114-5.

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A number of academic disciplines, history chief among them, prioritize analysis over synthesis. Thankfully Elizabeth Isichei pays that tradition no heed in creating another grand work on Africa's religious past. Those familiar with the author's prior work of synthesis on the religions of Africa, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (1995), will quickly notice the similar style of this text. Once again the text is an easily readable and engaging narrative, peppered with examples and anecdotes, and clearly organized into frequent subheadings. At times, this reviewer questioned the meta-organization of the text regarding African indigenous religions, an issue I will address in greater detail below. In fairness, the author does acknowledge that her text is but one possible response to the difficulty of writing on a subject as immense as Africa's religious history.

Isichei organizes the work into four major parts that discuss religions to 600 CE: Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religions. The author acknowledges the importance of Gnosticism, Manichaeism, Hinduism, and Judaism (and, one might add, Phoenician religion, Roman religion, Greek religion, and Baha'ism) for particular epochs and regions of Africa, but says the impact of such religions has not been not sufficiently widespread or long-lasting for inclusion in a text of this nature. I think we can surely agree with the logic behind such a decision, as the impact of these religions has been quite small when compared to that of Islam, Christianity, and traditional religions.

The first part addresses religion to 600 CE. The section title is a bit of a misnomer and contains just two chapters. The first of these chapters is a strong theoretical one on the study of "traditional" religions. I would

recommend this chapter to anyone interested in the production of knowledge or the study of religion as it nicely summarizes the nature of indigenous religions as well as extant issues regarding academia's priorities concerning religion. The treatment is very fair indeed and challenges both Eurocentric and nationalist interpretations of Africa's religious past.

Isichei contends, in the last portion of this chapter, that there is a long-standing tradition of using a single culture, or case study, to represent continental trends. I would not challenge the use of such a strategy and am perfectly comfortable with its careful application. What I would take exception with is Isichei's choice of cases to illustrate the nature of traditional religions on a continental scale—ancient Egyptian religion. I do not wish to challenge the African credentials of ancient Egypt and would rather not enter a debate on the nature of the ancient Egyptians. However, I would contend that the themes illustrated by ancient Egyptian religion are anomalous beyond the ancient Nile valley. Ancient Egyptian religion seems a very poor choice to exemplify the nature of African indigenous religions. Moreover, three-and-a-half pages are hardly enough coverage to serve such a critical function. One does not gain a very good understanding of the nature of traditional religions by either the selection of the case or the amount of coverage.

The second chapter of part 1 concerns the early church in northern Africa. The chapter is a strong one, introducing the various churches and movements in ancient North Africa and the Nile valley, yet seems curiously positioned, as it is separated from the later Christian material. But perhaps more importantly, given the brevity of coverage on African traditional religions that precedes it, those readers unfamiliar with Africa's reli-

gious past might easily come away with the impression that most Africans prior to 600 CE were Christian.

Isichei proceeds to discuss Islam in part 2. The seven chapters in this part are organized both chronologically and geographically (much like the way *A History of Christianity in Africa* is organized). North Africa receives most of the focus, which seems a perfectly appropriate decision. Any topic so grand must be selective. The chapters on Islam follow the premise that because Islam traditionally combined religion and politics, a discussion of Islam must largely follow a political history. This strategy is successful, for the most part, and covers the sort of topics (various Islamic empires, an assortment of significant leaders, numerous Sufi orders, Islam and colonialism, and Islam and the modern state) that I imagine anyone would expect to read about in a history of African Islam. The material is very readable and follows Isichei's great narrative style with her usual fascinating examples that likely took years to gather.

Yet I do believe there are three ways in which Isichei's material on Islam may be fairly critiqued. Firstly, the author's coverage of East Africa strikes me as much too slender. East African Islam is discussed in just three pages. I would agree with the author that Islam was largely a coastal, and thereby small, religion for most of East African history. However, given its significant growth in the nineteenth century, modern East African Islam seems worthy of its own chapter, just as Muslim West Africa and Muslim North Africa from the nineteenth century onwards receive separate chapters.

Secondly, there are moments in Isichei's narrative where additional material on theological/ideological history seems warranted. This is perhaps no more apparent than in the material on the Islamic empires of the western Sudan. Though Timbuktu is mentioned as a trading center, the site of a great mosque, and an independent province of a Moroccan empire, there is no discussion at all of Timbuktu as one of the world's most important centers of Islamic learning (*madrakah*). Nor is there a single mention of Chinguetti, to many still the "seventh holiest city of Islam." Isichei stresses that Muslims of the western Sudan felt they were distant from the Muslim holy lands. This was no doubt true for some Muslims, especially when journeying across the Sahara on the *hajj*. The distance, however, does not appear to have impeded the western Sudan from becoming a region celebrated for its centers of Islamic knowledge. In the medieval centuries few other parts of the Islamic world could rival places like Jenne, Timbuktu, or Chinguetti in their intellectual

vibrancy. As a West African proverb states, "Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom come from Timbuktu." More discussion of *kalam* and the intellectual contributions made by Africa's Muslims seems warranted.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the author's use of *jihad* seems to be borrowed from Western politicians, not from Islamic history. Isichei writes, "They turned to holy war, jihad, to create new states where the practice of Islam and social justice might flourish" (p. 61). The concept of *jihad* means to strive or to struggle and is not entirely synonymous with "holy war." Such striving or struggling can be manifested in numerous ways and can be as simple as striving to pray more often and more fervently, speaking out against injustice, or even writing about Islam. *Jihad* by the sword is simply one possibility within *jihad*, and even then Muslims have intensely debated the exact circumstances that permit that sort of *jihad*.<sup>[1]</sup> Space does not permit a full exploration of a concept as complicated as *jihad*, nor am I suggesting that Isichei should have spent a chapter doing so. However, to use the phrase "holy war" as though it were entirely interchangeable with the concept of *jihad* is irresponsible scholarship, in my opinion.

The third section of the book concerns Christianity. Unlike the previous section on Islam, the material on Christianity is organized chronologically and thematically, with geography serving a more minor organizing role within each chapter. This material covers five major epochs of African Christian history: African Christianity prior to the nineteenth century, when Christianity was restricted to the Nile valley, Ethiopia, Kongo, and Warri; the nature of missionization in the long nineteenth century; African responses and the creation of Ethiopian churches; the advent of Zionist churches; and lastly Neo-Pentecostalism. Given that Isichei has already written a survey book on African Christianity, one might expect this section to be a strong one. And one would be correct in making that assumption. The material is more theoretically and historiographically insightful than the sections on Islam. This is perhaps most clear in the material on the relationship(s) between missions and colonialism. Isichei argues against the standard nationalist interpretation that all missionaries were compliant agents of colonialism. Rather, Isichei contends that while missionaries found colonialism preferable to rule by white settlers or traditional leaders, they were just as often obstacles to colonial rule.

Isichei also makes such contentions in *A History of*

*Christianity in Africa*. The theoretical insights offered in the Christianity portion are also ones that we can find in her prior survey work. Some of the material can also be found in both books, but I find this entirely forgivable. After all, can one address the subject of African Christianity without discussing Simon Kimbangu or Mangena Maake Mokone? I suppose one could, but poorly. Any of us would address such topics when writing on African Christianity. Despite overlap, this reviewer did not find the material to be redundant compared to Isichei's earlier work. Many examples are different in this text. But most importantly the material is organized differently, providing it with a surprising freshness. I find it difficult to critique the material on Christianity as I find it to be quite well done. Do be prepared for a growing number of Nigerian examples in this material, especially regarding peoples of the Niger delta, but it does not form the majority.

The fourth and final section of this work is entitled "The Changing Face of 'Traditional' Religion." [2] This section is not about traditional religions as such but concerns neotraditional manifestations of indigenous religions. Isichei justifies this decision by explaining that "the ways in which 'traditional' religions are practiced and understood have been modified by encounters with other religious traditions" (p. 228). There is little question this is true. However, even with that being the case, this reviewer was disappointed that the author did not make much attempt at an educated reconstruction. As I remarked above, the few pages on ancient Egyptian religion provided an unsatisfying template, or model. The model is further weakened by the fact that it is never readdressed in this section. It seems an exemplifying model would only make sense if carried from the earlier portion of the book across this later material as well. Thus, if one approaches this text expecting to gain an understanding of the nature of precolonial indigenous religions, one will complete the text unsatisfied.

However, if one approaches this section hoping for a theoretically sophisticated discussion of the impact that missionization, colonialism, and the spread of Western

culture (and only in a few examples, Islam) have had upon indigenous religions, then one can finish feeling quite sated. The author examines themes such as divinities, ancestors, secret societies, rituals, and witchcraft, demonstrating the various manifestations that have resulted from modernity's impact on such religions. The true brilliance of this material, in this reviewer's opinion, is its re-examination of such ambiguous terms as "tradition" and "modernity," "progress" and "stasis." [3] In some cases, such as Mami Wata, neo-Yoruba religions, Mwari, and Bori, the religious manifestations have not merely survived, but increased in significance, and in some cases have become international. Isichei revisits a handful of ethnic groups in this material, across themes, particularly the Yoruba and Igbo, thus enabling the reader to gain a fuller sense of how a single neotraditional religion might exist today.

I believe this text would be of value to specialist and nonspecialist alike. The text possesses enough theoretical insights to satisfy the specialist, particularly the first chapter and the fourth section. Additionally, the array of examples could help to thematically illuminate the work of any scholar of African religions. For the nonspecialist, the material on Muslims in Africa and on Christianity in Africa would provide a valuable introduction replete with examples. However, the text does not provide a survey of precolonial indigenous religions. For that subject, Benjamin Ray's *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community* (1976) remains the best text.

#### Notes

[1]. Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 113-114.

[2]. I am uncertain why Isichei chose to use the singular "traditional religion" in the titles, as though there is such a thing as a single indigenous religion. The author uses the term in its scholarly acceptable plural form in the text itself.

[3]. Jacob K. Olupona, "Introduction," in *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religions and Modernity*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

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