

Book Reviews

James L. Cox 2014, *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies*. Durham: Acumen, x + 182 pp., ISBN 978-1-84465-754-4 (hbk), \$76.86; ISBN 978-1-84465-755-1 (pbk), \$24.05

This book examines the submissions of writers in both indigenous and non-indigenous religious traditions on indigenous religion as a religion in its own right. Thus the book sought to critique writers who seek to discover 'the Christian God in Africa' rather than to understand indigenous religions in their own right. The author presents four case studies in this quest: New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Australia and the Yupiit of Southwest Alaska. In addition, the book attempts to explicate controversies on the academic and theological study of religion. The book comprises an introduction, six chapters, notes, bibliography and an index.

The introduction provides a two-pronged definition of Religion: Substantive and Functional. The substantive delineates religion from other aspects of human behavior or alternate reality which believers enter into during ritual. The functional address the communal and social roles of religion. The author maintains that all religions are invented 'because religious authority is obtained from postulated alternate reality to which appeals are made to validate the power of transmitted tradition'. However the word 'invention' should not be construed as 'deceit' because all traditions are 'invented and legitimate'. Inventions are conscious efforts to link ancient traditions with recent religious innovations for purposes which suit the aims of those doing the inventing. Such inventions emanate due to two possible agendas: attempts to discover a 'Supreme Being among indigenous populations prior to extensive contact with Christian missionaries and Western patterns of thought' and 'motives of those who make contentions about indigenous deities as being commensurate with a High God or a Supreme Being'. A very important aim of this book is to 'expose the many agendas that inform a variety of interpretations of indigenous religious beliefs and to place them into historical, social and cultural contexts'. This in turn would show that the scientific study of religion is different/opposed to a theological study of religion.

Chapter One of the book examines the 'God Controversy' in pre-Christian indigenous Religions. Here the author asserts that the academic and theological interest in locating the Christian God in indigenous societies was fuelled by ideological presuppositions which pre-determined the interpretation of data. Those who argued for primitive monotheism did so primarily for theologically inspired reasons, while the anthropologists, writing with anti-religious bias were to study the societies which they believed were doomed to extinction. For both groups, the interest of indigenous people and their right as worthy subject of research were not recognized. The author discusses

the varied contributions of scholars on the utilization of the Darwin theory in defining indigenous religion. These scholars include Eric Sharp, Herbert Spencer, E. B. Taylor, J. G. Frazer, Baldwin Spencer, F. J. Gillen, and T. G. H. Strehlow. He identifies similarities in traditions espoused by Carl Strehlow and F. Muller, which in summary states that 'the origin of religion can be traced to the human propensity to grasp or apprehend the infinite through finite objects or symbols'. The author noted the dispute between Baldwin and Carl Strehlow concerning different submissions about the Aboriginal peoples. These differences are premised on ideological assumptions which he categorized into two: Evolutionist/Anti-religious sentiment and Primitive/Christian Theological bias.

The author identified Primitive monotheism (also known as the European Debate) as an issue of debate with Evolutionists. A notable contributor to this debate was Andrew Lang, whose interest in religion was divided into two by Sharpe. One, the mythological period (1873-1897) in which Lang engaged in polemic discussions opposed to Max Muller's 'nature-mythological' school. Two, the period (1897-1912), when his interest centred on arguments about the universal God. This was instigated by the discovery of an 'All Father' Figure in southeastern Australia called *Baiame* as reported by the anthropologist A. W. Howitt. Lange raised two objections to show that the 'primitive' people of Australia had a notion of a universal God before contact with Christian missionaries. These were: one, the people did not offer gifts to their 'All Father' like the missionaries prayed to the Christian God and two, they only initiated men who knew the name and knowledge of the 'All Father'. The author mentions the report of Manning John, a settler who recounted how the indigenous people held belief in *Baiame*, who bore similarities to the Christian God; however, no missionary had any direct contact with Aboriginal people as of the time of Manning's report. This suggests that Manning's report may not adequately represent the position of the Aboriginal Australians on *Baiame*. Lang argues further that this existing belief in 'All Father' later degenerated into animism and that explains why the scholars who visited people like the Arrernte did not find the 'All Father' belief on ground. Lang concludes that 'belief in the Australian High God, the 'All Father' called *Baiame* is not the result of Christian influences'. The author of this book submits that Lang's position is theological at its root.

Next the author analysis the position of Wilhelm Schmidt, the German-Austrian ethnologist, linguist and Catholic priest on scientific evidences for the idea of primitive monotheism. This Schmidt attempted through the study of Semitic languages, especially the language and cultures of the German protectorate of Papua Guinea. Schmidt in his 1910 book *The Place of the Pygmies in the Developmental History of Mankind* claims to have demonstrated that the pygmies of Central Africa believed in a High God/Supreme Being. Further, he claims that the attributes of the primeval Supreme Being are consistent with the high monotheism of Christianity e. g. omniscience, omnipotent, eternal and creative power. Lastly, the author surveys arguments of Mircea Eliade on Primitive Monotheism. Eliade's reference to the first line of the Christian Lord's Prayer 'our Father who art in heaven' as the 'most popular prayer in the world' is taken as a reference to primitive monotheism. Also, the author notes Eliade's version of the

degeneration theory which stressed that the original state of humanity is characterized by direct communication with God without need for mediators.

In sum, this chapter attempts an analysis of submissions by writers on controversies about the person, characteristics and names of God in pre-Christian indigenous religions. The author identified theological and anthropological agenda as roots that instigated some of the submissions. In addition, the author regards some of the 'scientific' evidences for linking God in pre Christian indigenous religion to Christianity as inadequate.

Chapter Two looks at the debate on the Supreme Being among the Maori of New Zealand known as *Io*. 'New Zealand foremost ethnographer' Elsdon Best provided the means for the wide acceptance that ancient Maori people believed in a High God called *Io* through his two Volumes titled *Maori Religion and Mythology* which was published in 1924. Further, Best submitted that the cult of *Io* is the highest form of Maori religious belief, the cult was secret and only a few could utter the sacred name. He described *Io* as a moral God. According to Best, creation and nature emanated from *Io* and *Io* is immanent in all things. Best concludes that this religion of the Maori and the cult of *Io* could not have been derived from Christian missionaries. Best had informants on Maori religion, the most prominent being Te Whatahoro, while another was Tutakangahau. In addition to the work of Best, the author identifies the important role of S. Percy Smith as custodian of some manuscripts, which were received from Te Whatahoro. Smith produced these manuscripts in translation as *The Lore of the Whare-wananga*, a very influential work, which was divided into two parts: 'Things Celestial' and 'Things Terrestrial'. The author submits that the works of Best and Smith had profound influence on Maori cultural revival of the mid-to-late 20th century which emphasized *Io* as a pre-Christian Supreme Being.

Other writers who contributed to the debate on *Io* as pre-Christian were identified and discussed by the author, including Rev. Maori Marsden who avers that *Io* brought the world into existence, and is the first cause from which all things originated. Also, Henare Tate, explained that the missionaries adopted the term *Atua* for Maori Supreme Being but indigenous Maori believed in *Io*, a name for God which predates Christian missionaries coming. He distinguishes the public use of the term *Io* and the *Io* tradition. Again, James Irwin published *An Introduction to Maori Religion* in 1984 where he discussed the ancient Maori belief in the Supreme Being *Io*. Then, Michael Shirres submits that *Io*, the Maori High God preceded contact with Christian missionaries and European powers. But from a theological frame, he summarizes his interpretation of *Io* as commensurate with the Christian faith.

There were arguments that the term *Io* was post European and post Christianity. Here the submissions of Sir Peter Buck also known as Te Rangi Hiroa subsist. He avers that some of the elements of the *Io* tradition could not have pre-dated Christianity. These included a cosmology of separating light from darkness, the waters from dry land and the suspension of the firmament. Also any reference to the righteous going through the 'east

door to ascend to supernatural realms and sinners through the south door to the underworld is contrary to the Maori and Polynesian concepts and too closely linked to the Christian teaching of Heaven and Hell' to have originated in indigenous Maori people. In the same vein, the author examined the position of Jonathan Z. Smith in the work *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown on Io* as a post-European and post-Christian term. Smith questions the reliability of materials gotten from the text by Tiwai Paraone in the 1907 *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, with an English translation by Hare Hongi whose integrity, Smith found questionable. Smith concludes that these materials and others like them are 'made in passing without any critical reflection or ---obtained after exposure to Christian missionary influence'. Consequently he submits that *Io* as a High God is a post-European phenomenon probably developed around 1880s as a Maori parallel to the Biblical tradition.

The author also examined the possible impact of Whatahoro's conversion to Mormonism on his testimonies concerning the Maori *Io*. Whatahoro was an important informant on Maori tradition and narratives but also a convert to Mormonism and this may have influenced his submissions on *Io* traditions. The similarities between his narrations on revelation and creation among the Maori and the Mormon account on the same subjects were too close to be coincidental. If the principal source of information on *Io* as a pre Christian Supreme Being among the Maori can be proven questionable, then present narratives on *Io* as the Maori primordial creator crumbles. Moreover, the attempt to locate a pre-Christian Maori high God is not done for its own sake rather it is for veiled or superstitious purposes, such as ideological or theological reasons. Moreover, contemporary Maori Christians use *Atua* as the name of God in a new tradition, which is accepted by the majority of practicing Maori Christians.

Chapter three surveys the attempts at making *Mwari*, the Supreme Being among the Shona of Zimbabwe, Christian. The author utilizes oral traditions, historical records, linguistics analysis and cultural practices in this bid. To the Shona the Spirit world and the human social world are understood as parallel to one another with each influencing the other. There is however a difference between reactions from regions in Zimbabwe. The basic pattern correlating social and spiritual hierarchies persist to date among the Korekore of the northern and central regions of Zimbabwe but in the southern regions, the chiefs pay tribute at *Mwari* shrines, which are very famous. The most notable of such shrines is located at a hill called Matonjeni, in a cave from which *Mwari* speaks its oracles. Another submission on *Mwari* by D. N. Beach is that *Mwari* was specifically Rozvi High God, who was a combination of sky God and ancestral spirit. This submission by Beach is authenticated because to this day the traditional tribute system whereby the king received payment in exchange for ruling has been preserved in the *Mwari* shrines. Consequently the author concludes that *Mwari* was more like a fertility deity judging from the spiritual and social structures, as well as the traditional rituals for crop fertility throughout Zimbabwe for senior ancestor spirits (Mhondoro).

Furthermore, the author postulates that *Mwari*, the fertility deity and ancestor has been transformed to represent God the creator, the Father of Jesus Christ by

contemporary Zimbabwe Christians. The author examines three sources to emphasize this position: (1) the theory of Canaan Banana who was the first president of Zimbabwe. In his book *Come and Share* he sets out a theological argument for equating *Mwari* with the Christian God. He submits that the 'Shona people have a God by the name *Mwari*' and *Mwari* is composed of the noun prefix "mi" and the noun stem "ari" which translate as "He who is" "similar to the God of Moses in the Bible who identify Himself as "He who is". Indeed, Banana bid to equate the God of Moses with *Mwari* culminated in his call for the Zimbabwe stories and myths to replace the Old Testament which led to controversies and the writing of articles from different perspectives in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy in the University of Zimbabwe in 1993. However, the author notes disparities in the presentation of the original myth by Kahari and the version by Banana. In Kahari's account it is apparent that *Mwari* is progenitor of a specific people, bound to a particular place and identified as being inseparable from ancestral traditions. These disparities to the author confirms that *Mwari* was originally a deity of fertility, who stood at the pinnacle of a long line of ancestors whose collective presence ensures the stability and preservation of the people; hence while Banana's agenda was theological, that of Kahari was social. It is noteworthy that the author describes Banana's submission on *Mwari* as an 'invention'. (2) The author notes three possibilities of the Shona language analysis as concerns the name of God. Firstly, the submission of the team of indigenous Biblical translators in Zimbabwe submitted that *Mwari* is a contraction of '*Muwari*' which means 'to spread' suggesting that *Mwari* is the being that has put in world, everything we see. Secondly, in a report on findings of Biblical translators as related by N. M. Creary the team advocated for the use of *Muwari* for God where the text refers to God as creator and the use of *Muari* as God's personal name. Further, the team asserts that *Mwari* is derived from *Muari* rather than from *Muwari*. Thirdly, is the suggested interpretation by H. Aschwanden that *Mwari* is a contraction of 'mi' and 'hari' which means 'to be in a jar'. To the author, this confirms that *Mwari* is the God of fertility and this is supported by oral genres to the deity of fertility among the Shona.

Furthermore, the author examines the Roman Catholic theology and Death rituals on Shona *Mwari*. The historical background of the use of *Mwari* in Catholic theology has been marked by controversies as to the name of God being *Mwari* or *Yave*. But by 1963, *Mwari* was used almost everywhere among the Roman Catholics for God. The author explains how the Catholic Church accommodates Shona religious traditions into Christian liturgies. An example is the '*kurova guwa*' which is intended to bring home an ancestor spirit about a year after a person's death. This is to enable the departed one assume responsibilities of guarding, protecting and caring for his or her descendants. The Roman Catholic Church renamed the practice '*kuchenura munhu*' meaning 'to purify the person'. The author asserts that this act of incorporation by the Roman Catholic Church is clearly a theology of 'invention'. Moreover, the decision of the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe to equate *Mwari* with God, the Father and first person of the Trinity is based on a non-empirical theological interpretation of pre-Christian indigenous beliefs and practices.

Chapter Four focuses on the Rainbow Spirit Theology, a contemporary movement aimed at indigenizing the Christian idea of God in Australia. This theology is represented by the rainbow-serpent which was severally researched by Radcliffe-Brown. Radcliffe-Brown described the rainbow-serpent as a conception of the rainbow as a huge serpent which inhabits deep permanent waters and is associated with rain and rainmaking. It is a sort of 'guardian-spirit' and the Aborigines conceive of it as 'the spirit of water'. Other researchers who worked on this topic include A. P. Elkin on rock painting as historical record of Aboriginal belief system; W. E. Stanner who described the rainbow-serpent as Kunmanggur, a being of great size with superhuman powers. Also, the works of Elkin, Hiatt and Warner & Berndt shows the possibility of the rainbow-serpent being bisexual. A germane question for the author is 'is the rainbow-spirit as presented in the rainbow-spirit theology the same figure described in anthropological literature as rainbow-serpent? He identifies three sources for possible answers to this question. One, the report of the consultations titled 'Rainbow Spirit Theology' which was first published in 1997, later in 1999 and revised in 2007. According to this report, the two terms are the same. Two, a book titled *The Rainbow Spirit in Creation* which shows that the two terms are the same because in seven of the ten drawings that the book considered, the central figure is a serpent; and three, an article by George Rosendale titled 'Milbi Dabaar' which identifies the rainbow-spirit as the same with the rainbow-snake. Another penitent question for the author is 'How do the elders interpret the rainbow-serpent as being commensurate with the Christian idea of God?' The author infers from the responses of the rainbow-spirit elders that the rainbow-serpent is related to the land, and Christ is the incarnation of the rainbow-serpent. Also, there is reversal of theology because incarnation in Western thought is that God descends from above to the earth, to the land, and becomes human. But this is replaced with the rainbow-spirit theology where God emerges out of the land, from the earth and takes on human flesh, making Christ 'truly Aboriginal'. In addition, the suffering of Christ is taken as symbolic of the suffering of Aboriginals at the hand of white colonizers and missionaries. However, the suffering of Christ is not the end of the story for his resurrection symbolizes that all things can be made new. The author sums this chapter with the submission that 'the rainbow spirit theology is based on the assumption that God nowhere left himself without a witness and through the rainbow-serpent was busy preparing the Aboriginal peoples for his fullest revelation in Christ'.

Chapter five explores recent re-interpretation of indigenous culture among the Yupiit of southwest Alaska. Submissions by scholars reflect the Yupiit belief in a universal spirit-*Ellam Yua* but early missionary contact with the people show they do not have the idea of a pre-Christian belief in an omniscient and all powerful Supreme Being. The absence of belief in a pre-Christian Supreme Being among the Yupiit is further buttressed because references to such belief are generally absent from early description of indigenous traditions in Alaska. The author notes scholar's use of the term to refer to the people as a whole, the language, members of the group, their culture and social practices. The author provides a detailed description of Alaska historically and geographically. The submissions of some scholars were interrogated, these include, Angayyuq Oscar Kawagley on the Yupiit worldview in his 1995 work titled *A Yupiaq*

Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit which engaged the attention of the author. Kawagley analyzed the term '*Ellam Yua*' to mean the spirit of the universe. He submitted further that an understanding of the multi-faceted term '*Ella*' is key to understanding the way the Yupiit traditionally unified all aspects of their lives. The term '*Ella*' epitomizes Yupiaq philosophy as a base word with numerous applications. Further, he presents the metaphor of the tripod whose legs represent three realms (natural, spiritual and human) as a demonstration of Yupik worldview. It is a coherent and solid framework that is threatened when the three supporting legs are not in proper balance due to breakdown in communication.

This framework is sustained in proper balance through the language, myths, legends and stories of the people. Again, the author examines the submission of Ann Fienup-Riordan on *Ellam Yua* and the eye of awareness. She submits that traditional Yupiit life was ordered by rules, which are often dramatized in rituals. Delineated rules govern every aspect of social relationships among traditional Yupik communities. Furthermore, is the centrality of understanding the symbolism of mask to the overall worldview of the Yupik, which is closely linked to the central role of the shaman 'whose role in linking the community with the world of spirits is critical. Again, she reports that *Kelek* is the ritual most associated with masks and shamans among the Yupiit. *Kelek* was performed 'to please the spirits of game yet to be taken to supply the needs of the living' In addition to the stance of these scholars, the author also considered the testimonies of some village elders and indigenous Christians on the pre-Christian idea of a Supreme Being. These testimonies present ways of life in old Yupik setting which correspond with many Christian teachings. But then, as observed by the author 'no major Christian theological works have been written that interpret ancient Yupik beliefs about *Ellam Yua* as equivalent with the Christian idea of God'. However, the Catholic Mass incorporates indigenous symbols into the liturgy, an example being the introduction of drumming and dancing into church services. But the author notes that though Catholic leaders in Alaska are making creative attempts 'to use culturally meaningful symbols in liturgical renewal, but by comparison, little effort is being made to reconcile pre-Christian cosmological ideas with Christian theology. Conclusively, the author submits that there is disparity between the ancient belief in a universal personal consciousness among the Yupik people of southwest Alaska and a Christian understanding of a creator prior to contact with non-Alaska groups and missionaries. However, the highlight on the ancient belief in *Ellam Yua* provides a way for indigenous leaders to restore pride in their own culture and values. Interpretations of the traditional worldview along Christian perspectives by Yupik elders suggest that traditions are dynamic, which confirms the author's stance on 'invention'.

Chapter six presents the author's use of the conceptual category of 'cultural hybridity' to interrogate the idea of 'invention of tradition'. He poses the question 'can case studies be generalized and applied more broadly to other 'inventions' of God in indigenous societies? He differentiates between syncretism and cultural hybridity and chooses cultural hybridity as a better suited term for the discussion in this book. Thereafter a summary of the major submission in the book is given. On the case of New Zealand, the

move in the past thirty to forty years fuelled by the assumption by Christian theologians, both Pakeha and indigenous that the Maori Supreme Being *Io* is the same with the Christian God. The primary source on which Christian theologians relied for this assumption was Te Whatahoro, and evidences were shown that his testimonies are unreliable. In Zimbabwe, missionaries and African theologians insisted on the existence of a pre-Christian idea of a God called *Mwari*, among the Shona. But Herbert Aschwaden, a Swiss medical doctor associates *Mwari* with a fertility deity and traditional rituals that address the family. Furthermore, Herbert's submission is favored by historical and ethnographic evidences showing that *Mwari* originally was a sky God associated with rain and fertility. In Australia, the rainbow-serpent was made into a counterpart to the Christian God who is the creator. The rainbow-serpent is a widespread symbol which was reported in many parts of Australia. However, although stories about the rainbow-serpent abound in many parts of Australia, the diverse ways in which it is conceived vary significantly in content and in relative importance. A. P. Elkin's research on cave paintings which was located in the forest river area in northwest Australia, suggest that the rainbow-serpent was associated with fertility and reproduction. This is clearly evident by the image of *wondjina* which was associated with 'making babies'. In Alaska, the Yupik people, local elders, villagers and academics formed a revival movement towards championing traditional values as a resistance mode to the dominant white population. *Ellam Yua* is construed by these groups as a universal consciousness that is on a level equal to the Christian God. Nevertheless, Michael Oleksa, a priest and theologian presents *Ellam Yua* as an anticipation of the incarnation of Christ, thereby making Yupik worldview subordinate to orthodox Christianity.

The author submits that the empirical evidences which he presents in this book demonstrates overwhelmingly that those who affirm the existence of primordial indigenous Supreme Being actually 'invented' those arguments for a number of reasons, including theological and anthropological reasons. Consequently, he argues that indigenous deities cannot be equated with the Christian conception of God unless firm empirical evidences can be found to support the alleged consistency between the two. Further, all assertions about pre-Christian religious beliefs must be subjected to close empirical scrutiny. But the author recognizes the need to always distinguish theological debates from academic research on this issue. Also, there is the risk of excluding the voices of believers from his interpretations of theological efforts to make the Christian God comparable with pre-Christian indigenous beliefs in Supreme Being as 'inventions'. He advocates that indigenous religions should be studied as traditions in their own right and not as preparation for Christianity or as a base on which all religious beliefs are constructed. Thus, 'the aim of the study of indigenous religions should be to understand the religious beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples, rather than to discover the Western God in indigenous societies'.

The age-long debate on the right relation between theological and academic study of religions surfaced in this book and provides the platform for ethical considerations in academic investigation. While the worldview of indigenous peoples remain novel but complex, academic research often times seek to super impose the reductionist paradigm

for agendas quite different from theological consideration. The interlock between the ambition of indigenous peoples to maintain originality and stay relevant to contemporary development also emanates in this discourse. In all, the author did justice to his stated objectives and challenged scholars of religion to pursue 'academic fairness' in the academic study of indigenous religion. The book is a must-read for scholars of religions, especially phenomenologists.

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Kumalo, Simangaliso, 2013, *Religion and Politics in Swaziland: The Contributions of Dr JB Mzizi*. Bloemfontein: SUNPRESS, 360 pp., ISBN: 978-1-920382-29-2, R375

This book is an anthology of a decade (1995-2005) of short and long essays by the late Dr Joshua B. Mzizi, a former Senior Lecturer at the University of Swaziland. Some of these papers were written for formal academic conferences, where they were delivered, but the majority of them were written for the two big newspapers in Swaziland, *Times of Swaziland* (www.times.co.sz) and *The Observer*. Mzizi was a dedicated liberation theologian and he used his knowledge and skills of this sub-discipline to reflect on the religio-political dynamics of his country of birth, Swaziland. His writings are a minefield of knowledge for those interested in the history, politics and religion of Swaziland. The book is a collection of pieces that were scattered mostly in newspapers, journals and books. By compiling these works Kumalo has not only produced a comprehensive volume on Mzizi's work but has also provided information on Swaziland, a country about which very little is known.

The book has five main sections. The first section concentrates on introducing Mzizi's works. Using a postcolonial theoretical approach to critiquing the historical and political developments of Swaziland, it locates Mzizi's writings into its proper context in this theological discourse. It draws from the postcolonial theories of Galati Speak, Homi Bhabha and Michel Foucault to reflect on Mzizi's writings. The rationale for writing the book is to share, preserve and pass on to future generations Mzizi's contribution to the struggle against the lack of freedom and rights experienced by Swazis under the monarchical government of King Mswati. Basic in this struggle is how the monarchy has used religion to justify its domination and claim for absolute power over the nation. This section argues that Mzizi's writings unpacked the misuse of religion by the system so that it can keep the ordinary citizens of Swaziland, who happen to be very religious, obedient to the government. According to Mzizi, religion was used to convince the Swazis that to be against His Majesty's government is to be against God.

With this background, Mzizi's own biographical story, the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious dynamics of Swaziland receive attention in the second section. Again the aim of this section is to bring to awareness the foundation of the unjust