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The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions

Edited by
Elias Kifon Bongmba

Foreword by
Jacob K. Olupona
Dedicated to

Mr. Johannes Bongmba
A loving and supportive Father

Mr. Isaac Ngala Sayani
Who departed on the eve of the publication of this book

And to

Professor Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo
Friend, Colleague, and Exemplary African Scholar

May the Ancestors reward all of you for your many acts of compassion.
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Foreword

Jacob K. Olupona

The ever-changing landscape of African religious culture and society requires that scholars provide regular assessment of the field, and based on the particular research with which they are engaged, reflect on the state of the discipline and the religious traditions themselves. The last few decades have seen a strong interest among scholars in the humanities and social sciences in African religious phenomena. Once a preoccupation of the clergy of the Christian and Muslim communities, the study of religion in Africa now involves a multidisciplinary scholarly field. This field has produced significant thematic, conceptual, theoretical, and methodological innovations as well as a substantive focus on the socio-cultural dimensions and contexts of religion, while at the same time taking very seriously religion qua religion. It has attracted phenomenologists, theologians, comparativists, anthropologists, sociologists, literary critics, and those who practice and study the arts: music, literature, and the visual and material arts, among others. These new approaches have produced path-breaking monographs, books, and journal articles. Until now, however, no single book has reflected sufficiently on the wide range of topics, themes, and theoretical interventions possible in this field to provide a well-rounded picture of the state of African religious scholarship.

To answer the need for such a work, Elias Bongmba has assembled A Companion to African Religions, a book that attempts to demonstrate the breadth and depth of this scholarship and the tradition itself. This gigantic volume has pushed the boundaries of discourse forward and made this important material accessible to students, scholars, and the general readership. Elias K. Bongmba’s training and scholarship eminently qualify him to take the lead in producing this massive volume, whose essays reveal so compellingly the interdisciplinary nature of African religious scholarship, which has striven to integrate theology with the history of religions, anthropology with oral literature, and sociology with ethnographic research, to give just a few examples. Moreover, Bongmba’s linguistic and scholarly competence, especially in African Francophone and Anglophone scholarship and traditions, makes it possible for him to draw from both cultures and regions to compile this fascinating work. This work, then, provides continuity in African religious research, but it also exemplifies a healthy discontinuity in its innovative theoretical and methodological engagements with several salient but
previously unexamined topics. Africa has a triple religious heritage. Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions constitute the core traditions that are examined by scholars; but they do not exist as separate entities in the lives of the people, and the essays in this volume reflect that pertinent fact.

As the editor notes, the volume reflects continuity both with past and present work. From its ethnographic essays to its theological interpretations, the volume reflects the status of African religious traditions both in their lived realities and in their invented and imagined contexts. It is clear to us that scholars can no longer treat African religious traditions as forms of static entities that have not changed over time and space. As we now recognize, religious traditions are dynamic and constantly in motion, impinging on modernity, responding to new technology, and being transformed by newly imagined immigrant and diasporic communities. Africa has witnessed both the good and the ugly in the range of possibilities of human existence. Certainly, Africa has seen in the last few decades more than her fair share of vicious civil wars, military misrule and civilian dictatorship, HIV/AIDS, corruption, gender disparity, and sexual violence. Paradoxically, Africa has also witnessed significant social transformation, from political emancipation to new democratic governance and emerging economies. All of these developments, both negative and positive, have affected the practice of religion. These essays reflect on this critical fact in the lives of Africans across the continent.

This volume also delves into African religions’ responses to modernity in its various guises. These responses reflect the increasing connections between African belief systems and cultural and social conditions, such as between witchcraft and sorcery on the one hand and political power, poverty, wealth, and sexuality on the other. Technology and the mass media have also affected the fortune of religion in the last few decades, as it aids its spread and contributes to its transformation in the new global age. The twenty-first century presents a special challenge, as Africa has been thrust into the center of a global conversation on religion, culture, and society, especially the sometimes conflict-ridden dialogue between Islam and Christianity. African intellectuals can participate in this conversation by providing new and constructive approaches to existing problems. Several of the essays included here have done so in a way that makes the volume required reading and an important reference tool for African religious scholars.

Ever since John Mbiti’s classic work African Religion and Philosophy broke down the boundaries constricting the study of African religion, this discipline has expanded in exciting new directions. We have moved from the traditional phenomenological approaches of the 1970s, when I was in graduate school, to focus on theological concerns that dominated African scholarship in the apartheid era, when the racial divide highlighted the theological confrontation between black theology of liberation and Afrikaner civil religion in southern Africa. The last few decades have seen the flowering of women’s and gender studies, especially in theological circles. In the current dispensation, the debate on sexuality that thrust African churches into the center of one of the largest crises in Christendom and that raises serious ethical and human rights concerns proves that African religious scholarship can no longer shy away from contentious topics. For contemporary African scholars not to address these issues would be considered a serious disservice to the study of religion in Africa. Religion certainly matters in
Africa and scholars of religion have a significant role to play in discussing and framing issues on how African faith traditions perform in the public sphere. This collection of essays clearly shows how African scholarship has done so.

The volume breaks out of the disciplinary boundaries characteristic of the old scholarship to promote transdisciplinary engagement with the topics whereby individual scholars are able to use every available tool of interpretation and analysis. In addition, several of the essays explicate the connections between faith traditions and occultism, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS. The volume exemplifies what African religious studies should be, a joint enterprise that encourages participation on the part of white and black scholars, Africans and non-Africans, in the serious task of investigating, analyzing, and engaging in scholarship that transcends colonial and postcolonial boundaries.

Bongmba must be commended for privileging the continent and focusing entirely on African culture, religion, and society. He has decided not to be influenced by current academic fashion, which favors studies of diasporic and immigrant scholarship. Bongmba prefers to do an in-depth study of Africa. One cannot have a good grasp of the Black Atlantic without a thorough grasp of the “home” tradition. Nevertheless, the study of the African diasporic and immigrant study deserves future study. From this fascinating volume will emerge significant rhizomes, which will form topics of dissertations in the years to come. This volume also lays the foundation for an eventual encyclopedia of African religion, which Africanist scholars will most likely spearhead in the near future.

Bongmba’s volume contains excellent essays representing the full range of African religious traditions. It offers a refreshing approach to the study of African religion in which scholars think and write about religion not as fixed beliefs and practices, but as sacred orientations and activities that produce meaningful responses from others. Africans’ constant quest for the transcendent and the sacred are greatly appreciated as traditions in motion and in relationship with the peoples’ geographical environment, political realities, social context, and cultural practices. The beauty of this work is that it provides a useful archaeology of African religious studies scholarship that explores the intellectual history of the study of this tradition, and in doing so, it enables us to recognize and to acknowledge what the field was, what the current scholarship is, and the new directions we might like it to take in the twenty-first century.

A Companion to African Religions is a richly detailed volume of essays that amply demonstrates how far the academic study of religions in Africa has come. Unlike before, when African voices were hardly heard in works describing the religions of their own peoples, this volume clearly includes African agency in interpreting the religious events unfolding on the continent. It is worth noting that the African Association for the Study of Religion, which began in Zimbabwe in 1992 as a global forum for the study of religion in Africa and currently chaired by the editor of this volume, has contributed immensely to the present status of scholarship through an African-centered governing body supported by friends and colleagues in North America and Europe. The association has spurred many intellectual exchanges, and over the years, the many conversations that took place at conferences, seminars, and lectures sponsored by this body have led to a flowering of scholars, of African religion, many of whom are contributors to this outstandingly comprehensive body of work.

I also want to express appreciation to Rachel Schneider Vlachos for reading most of the essays and giving me valuable feedback. Margarita Simons also worked to format part of the bibliography entries. I also thank Terri Laws, Enoch Gbadegesin, and Nathanael Homewood for working with me on the index. I thank Rebecca Harkin, the publisher at Wiley-Blackwell, for her support, suggestions, and willingness to get in touch with some of the contributors directly to give advice on the mechanics of the project. I also thank Sally Cooper for all the timely correspondence and helpful feedback. Isobel Bainton is an incredible editor and patient with an eye on specifics as well as the entire project. I also thank Andrew Humphries, the commissioning editor for religious studies, who worked with me when the project started. Rebecca Harkin and the team at Wiley-Blackwell have demonstrated exemplary professionalism and the result is A Companion to African Religions.

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Elias K. Bongmba
Houston, TX. July 2011
Introduction

Elias K. Bongmba

This *Companion to African Religions* introduces the reader to research and an engaging dialogue on the religious imagination and experience in the African context. The scholars whose essays appear here were given a broad latitude and flexibility to explore their topics and the result far exceeds our intention because what we have here is a transdisciplinary exploration of religious experience in addition to analysis of some major religious traditions, ideas, and religious practice in Africa. Contributors were invited to address creatively a variety of issues from their research and scholarly engagement to provide a resource on significant information, on historical trajectories, current research, and future perspectives while engaging in lively conversation on methodological, theoretical, interpretive perspectives, and emerging ideas on religion in a post-neocolonial global climate.

The *Companion* is organized into three parts. In Part I the authors discuss religious experience from selected methodological perspectives. I must state here that even when the essay does not address all of the technical details of methodology as some of the essays in Part I do, they are included in the methodology section because they significantly reflect recent theoretical and methodological developments. Part II, the longest part of the book, is devoted to essays on different aspects of religious life, highlighting selected traditions, movements, contemporary issues, innovations, and contested issues from the Christian tradition and its African Initiated Churches, Islam, Neo-traditional religions, and Hinduism in South Africa. We recognize that in a volume like this, it is not possible to cover all traditions and it is the hope that other publications could take up the rich religious diversity that exists in Africa. In Part III, the scholars discuss broadly religious life in cultural and intellectual areas by looking at religion from selected disciplinary perspectives or topics.

One would expect a work like this to start by defining religion and African religions; but this is not the case because of the complexity of religious life in Africa. V.Y. Mudimbe and Susan Kilonzo discuss the idea of the religious in their essay and Stephen Ellis and...
Gerrie ter Haar also offer a brief definition of religion. In my own approach, I have moved between Clifford Geertz’s view that religion is a set of symbols that have a strong, persistent, continuing impact on the dispositions and action of people by offering ideas on existence in a manner that is appealing to the people who see these sets of symbols as a reflection of reality, and Paul Tillich’s theological perspective which has also influenced my view that religion involves practices that reflect an individual’s ultimate concerns. These essays discuss the religious experience and expression as part of a symbolic, concrete, and historical world mediated by human and spiritual forces. The transdisciplinary perspectives provide descriptive and critical analysis of the religious experience as thoughtful experience that will remain open to analysis and critique. It is obvious that we provide only a snapshot of religion and the religious experience in Africa by drawing from past and current research to address contemporary issues with the hope of opening a critical dialogue about the future of religion in Africa. The scholars all have long-term research engagement in Africa and are uniquely qualified to undertake this critical enterprise. Religion is growing fastest in Africa and growth in some traditions defies expectations. Some of the essays in this volume present the dynamic and changing nature of Pentecostalism as an idea, praxis, and community. It is a target that is grounded in local spaces but embraces a global outlook, and structured within institutional and economic frameworks that reverses previous perspectives on religious institutions or denominationalism.

This book reflects a continuity and discontinuity with the scholarly literature on African religions. First, in terms of continuity, it follows a scholarly tradition of publishing interdisciplinary and critical analysis of the “variety of religious experience” in Africa since the 1950s and we illustrate it with a few selected examples. Daryll Forde edited *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, in which the authors explored the cosmology of selected African communities, linking cosmology and religious experience. Terence Ranger and I.N. Kimambo edited *The Historical Study of African Religion* based on papers presented at a conference on that subject at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. This landmark work contained an analysis of socio-economic and political issues that shape religiosity but, more importantly, established the historicity of African religions, an idea previously dismissed by scholars like Geoffrey Parrinder. Three years later, T.O. Ranger and John Weller edited *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa* from the papers presented at the Chilema Lay Training Center in Malawi in 1971 where participants discussed missionization, colonialism, indigenous religions, experiments with the adaptation of local rituals into the Christian tradition, Christianity and African nationalism, and the growth of African Initiated Churches (AIC).

Wim van Binsbergen and Martin Schoffeleers edited the groundbreaking *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion* in 1985 based on papers presented at a conference at the University of Leiden in 1979. The authors probed theoretical developments in a multi-disciplinary perspective, explored early cultic practices in parts of Africa, and new developments within African Initiated Churches (AIC), which at the time were no longer protest movements but a socio-religious reality on the symbolic landscape in Africa. Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek, and Dennis L. Thomson edited the papers *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression* in 1994 based on the papers that
were presented at a conference at Brigham Young University in 1986. The editors
grouped the essays in three areas: the translatability of religion, comparison, and
performance demonstrating in different ways religious experience and expression in daily
Society*. The essays discuss beliefs, practices, the study of African religions, and the
revitalization of African religions today.\(^6\) Jan Platvoet, James Cox, and Jacob Olupona
edited the massive book, which is rich in resources, *The Study of Religion in Africa*, based
on papers presented at the African Association for the Study of Religion in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1992.\(^7\)

Other studies were regional in nature. For example, *Revealing Prophets*, edited by
David Anderson and Douglas Johnson, provided insightful studies of the prophetic
imagination in African religious life.\(^8\) Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle edited
*Religion and Politics in East Africa* in 1995 and contributors discussed interaction
between religions, individuals, and the state: as well as the debate on *shari’a* in Sudan,
and church/ state struggles in Uganda and Kenya.\(^9\) Thomas Spear and Isara N. Kimambo
edited *East African Expressions of Christianity*, in which the scholars explored missions,
popular evangelism, conversion, Charismatic movements, revivalism, and the impact
of Christianity on society.\(^10\) In Kenya, theologian Jesse N.K. Mugambi and his colleagues
have edited numerous books on Christianity in Africa providing a critical analysis of
local and continent-wide developments. Several of the works have addressed themes
such as reconstruction, an idea Mugambi addressed in his Rockwell Lectures at Rice
University in 1992. David Chidester and a team of researchers edited annotated bibli-
ographies on religion in South Africa, while Martin Prozesky and John de Grucuy edited
*A Southern African Guide to World Religions*, in which the authors introduced readers to
different religious traditions in South Africa, and *Living Faiths in South Africa*, in 1992.\(^11\)

M.F.C. Bourdillon edited *Christianity South of the Zambezi*: a text that explored Christianity in the southern African region.\(^12\) Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport edited a
brilliant study of Christianity in South Africa, addressing among other issues the begin-
ning of Christianity in South Africa, the churches of modern South Africa, African
Initiated Churches (AIC), Christianity and “sub-cultures,” Christianity and the creative
arts, and Christianity, race, and power.\(^13\)

Eva Evers Rosander and David Westerlund edited *African Islam and Islam in Africa*, in
1997.\(^14\) The authors discuss Sufism, *shari’a*, *tahara* (purity), and *baraka* (blessing). The
book also explored Sufi rural spirituality, Islamic radicalism in North Africa, human
rights, the translation of the Qur’an into local languages, Islamic music, relationship
between men and women, and Islam and ethnicity in Africa. In 2000, Nehemia Leviz-
ion and Randall Pouwels edited *The History of Islam in Africa* and the authors discussed
patterns of Islamization, growth of Islam in different regions of Africa, and broad issues
like law, gender, Islamic education, Islamic brotherhoods, healing, the arts, literature,
and music.

Recently, Frieder Ludwig and Afe Adogame edited *European Traditions in the Study of
Religion in Africa*, a collaborative project between Bayreuth University and the African
Association for the Study of Religion.\(^15\) The authors address African religion in western
scholarship by focusing on Islam, Christian missions, the contribution of leading schol-
ars, institutions, and contemporary studies of religion within Africa. Scott S. Reese has
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edited *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, in which the authors address geographical and historical perspectives on Islamic studies in Africa. Some of the studies in the book discuss well-known movements, such as the *Tijaniyah*, scholars like Murtada al-Zabidi (1732–91), and the Fondo Kati library in Niger. Jacob Olupona and Terry Rey have recently edited *Orisà Devotion as World Religion: the Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* from a conference paper at Florida International University. The essays explore Yorùbá religion at home and in the diaspora. In the keynote address presented at the conference, Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka discussed the tolerant spirit of African Gods, ignored and abused by colonials, who sought to impose their own religions on Africans.


Second, regarding discontinuity, one important feature of this *Companion* is that we emphasize a trans-disciplinary analysis of the religious experience, devoting the last major section of the book to religious perspectives from various disciplines and contemporary intellectual dialogue as an important way of imaging religious life in Africa today.

The first groups of essays address methodological and theoretical perspectives on religion. In chapter 1, James Cox discusses methodological perspectives used to understand the religious experience in the African context. Drawing from his teaching experience in Zimbabwe, Cox argues the phenomenological approach because it minimizes the insider/outsider debate on the study of religion and focuses on the subject matter. Phenomenology stresses *epoché*, which Edmund Husserl used to refer to the suspension of one’s beliefs to allow the subject under investigation to speak on its own terms. Phenomenologists also use the eidetic intuition to understand the meaning of the religious phenomena, the entities, and their universality. The process involves an intersubjective empathy because the scholars attempt to understand the thoughts of the practitioners and, through the process of interpolation, scholars relate to the thought and actions of other human beings or imagine what it might be like to have faith or belong to a religious community. This open approach to religion does not start with an affirmation or assumption that there is a Supreme Being, since an *epoché* broadens the terrain of inquiry through which the scholar unveils divers symbols and meanings of the religious experience.

In chapter 2, V.Y. Mudimbe and Susan Mbula Kilonzo discuss philosophical dimensions of religious experience by grounding their analysis of the religious and its rites as social acts as was conceptualized by Emile Durkheim. In doing this, they bypass...
“traditional” philosophical focus on such topics as the rationality of belief, the existence of God, the problem of evil, natural religion, and miracles. Instead, Mudimbe and Kilonzo offer philosophical interpretations and a critical textual dialogue on the religious experience by reflecting on a broad range of rituals, symbols, space, time, death, and eschatology; problematizing areas of convergence and differences in Africa in light of the encounter with Christianity and Islam and the will to Africanization of the new religions. Their approach appreciates metaphysics without privileging the natural theological and ontological perspectives. They also combine hermeneutical approaches, employ linguistic categories, and analyze the spatial realities that structure the religious experience as well as unveil a pluralistic demand to understand “mythic, doctrinal, ethical, [and] social” aspects of the religious experience.

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (chapter 3) bring a social scientific analysis to symbolic thought and practices at the dawn of the new millennium; a period greatly anticipated by the computer world in the march towards “Y 2K,” the great apocalypse that did not materialize. However, the Comaroffs argue that a new sense of order and disorder arrived with the epoch. The new \textit{zeitgeist} was employed by people to exploit the desire and quest for wealth in a manner that rejects aspects of Max Weber’s Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism. What we have seen is that people have ignored the role of thrift and restraint on spending and people have chased, and continue to chase, financial gains, embrace conspicuous consumption at the expense of thrift, and ignore economic discipline. Get-rich-quick schemes ignored Adam Smith’s notion of the creation of wealth.

What is disturbing is the fact that religious communities boldly popularize get-rich schemes by claiming that Christians are destined to be wealthy and that the response from some of the churches to economic crisis stands as a demonstration of a new second coming of capitalism when there are doubts about the success of economic liberalization or the advancement of democratic ideals. The rise of civil society has not slowed down consumerism: human rights abuses and exclusions based on class, race, gender, and sexuality continue to grow. The millennial and the magical chase for wealth at the expense of freedoms, and exclusion of “the great containers of modern social order have been fractured, so have the cultural, ethical, and spiritual coordinates on which they were founded; coordinates that charted a conceptual and institutional terrain long taken for granted in classic Western . . . ideology and its civil extensions: among them, the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, the transcendent and the temporal, the material and the moral, the pious and the pecuniary—and, most of all, modernity and enchantment.” The intense search for capital even in emerging religious communities has created occult economies, Ponzi get-rich schemes, and “here, again, is the specter, the distinctive spirit, of neoliberalism in its triumphal hour.” It is a spirit reflected in many of the budding Pentecostal Churches.

René Devisch (chapter 4) provides critical methodological insight into studying divination by emphasizing the bodiliness of divination, mischaracterized by others as an irrational animistic system that owes its existence to vindictive spirits, ancestors, and sorcery. These prejudices could be overcome by studying divination as a “bodily, affect-laden, sensory, mediumnic, artistic-fold, and skills of human consciousness.” One could argue that Devisch updates his own 1985 perspective on divination by analyzing “the
inter-world-interconnectivity” of divination in light of recent cognitive approaches to divination: a broad field of praxis involving consciousness and oracular scrutiny in an inter-human world, which lies beyond facts and involves an un-concealment that motivates client and diviner to employ all sensory mechanisms to seek reasons and insights into the client’s condition and future. Divination still involves shamans or sangomas who serve as experts and facilitate experiential, visionary, and sensorial contact with the world of the spirit. Devisch captures all this in a wonderful phrase: “experiential phenomenological and praxis-oriented approaches to divination,” which involves language to explore “the realm of unnegotiable given or unassimilable kernel at the heart of human experience beneath or beyond sheer appearance, semblance, and pretending, imagination, symbolization or language game.” These experiences dissolve boundaries of the self, expand, and integrate self into a social world. Participants, especially the diviner, enter a cosmic drama in order to understand the interworldly experience, making divination an intersubjective engagement that grafts one’s self into a new perceptual self. In that process, the medium’s perceptive dreaming or revelatory experience cannot be separated from interdependence, intercommunication between all things in the experience of an interworldly praxis where divination is understood as life-bearing connotations, which “elaborates an ‘archaeological’ process of inter-world-originating a process that seeks to re-attune the client’s lived world in consonance with the ‘arche’ or ‘ceaseless re-emergence of the uterine life-source that gives birth to the local world’.”

Jonathan Draper and Kenneth Mtata write on orality as a method and in chapter 5 argue that religious life in Africa derives material from oral traditions. Scholars like Jan Vansina, Isidore Okpewho, Walter Ong, and Werner Kelber discussed the importance of Orality as performance and ritual enactment of traditions through songs, stories, legends, epics, which provide an insight into religious belief and communication in the community.20 Draper and Mtata discuss the oral dimensions of hymns and testimonies of the Ama Nazaretha of Isaiah Shembe and George Khambule’s Ibandla Labancwele. Other examples of oral literature include Qur’an recitations and Swahili tenzi (poems), songs, rock paintings, sculpture, memory boards, scarifications, necklaces, and symbols found in sacred places and objects that have provided inspiration for oral performances. The Great Hymn of Ntsikana is a major theological statement and Isaiah Shembe’s “hymns combine Zulu . . . diction and imagery with strong allusions to biblical . . . and Western hymnic conventions in creative tension.” Their essay invites a focus on the compelling oral dimensions of religious life.

Laura Grillo (chapter 6) argues that rituals are “thoughtful, deliberate, self-conscious [and] strategic [actions] conducted by self-conscious agents” as they “negotiate a responsible relationship in the human community with the ancestors, spirits, divinities, and cosmos.” Rituals involve more than abstract ideas because they are embodied activity. Grillo demonstrates many ways in which rituals involve a concrete body by discussing ritual practices and ritual objects. For example, in the Yoruba tradition the head, which is considered “seat of destiny,” receives great attention at initiation ceremonies. The body is also ritualized through scarification, circumcision, and other bodily symbols that have evocative power. Grillo also demonstrates that rituals are not merely repetitive events but thought and action related to cosmic events that have shaped