



## Religions in Contemporary Africa

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Religion is an indispensable factor which explains the development of the sub-Saharan African continent as well as linking Africa with other continents. Religious transformation in Africa went hand in hand with human history, social, political, and economic experiences. Over time, African Indigenous Religions (AIR) spread to the other parts of the world through human migrations such as slave trade. The external oriented religions such as Christianity, Islam and religions originating in Asia diffused to Africa from the 1<sup>st</sup> century. (pp.5, 35, 51) These religious traditions are co-existing and affecting each other while being shaped by African environment. (p.12) Recent studies on religion address, among other aspects, new religious practices in Africa and diaspora (Aderibigbe-Medine 2015), religion and reconciliations in Africa (Chapman-Spong 2003), relationship between religion and sexuality (Van Klinken, 2019; Chitando-Van Klinken 2016) and religion and politics in Africa. (Abink 2014) However, there has always been a need of updating sources to capture new trends, methodology and perspectives conducted in African context.

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*Religions in Contemporary Africa: An Introduction* by Laura S. Grillo, Adriaan Van Klinken and Hassan J. Ndzovu responds to the demand for an inclusive and comparative monograph of major African religions to cater for the needs of the undergraduate learners in African religions courses. The book addresses the significance and the interaction of traditional African religion, Christianity and Islam in African context and its impacts on spheres of African life. The authors' theoretical backgrounds in interdisciplinary fields of African religions and research experience in different parts of Africa culminated to the coverage of major religious traditions, themes, and the position of religion in several communities in each region of sub-Saharan Africa. This, in turn, makes the book valid for anthropology, history, sociology and theology students. The book uses simple and direct language suitable for undergraduate students. Themes are well elaborated through case studies, figures, and tables. Also, a rich table of contents and index as well as cross referencing for linking or elaboration of concepts added the value of the textbook. The book is organized into fifteen chapters divided into two parts. Interestingly, the book lacks a concluding chapter for what the authors acknowledge that it is introductory, and religion is too dynamic hence leaving it open-ended allows for further development (p. 12).

The first six chapters deal with religious trends in Africa. Whereas the three first chapter's hint on the onset and history of traditional African religion, Christianity, and Islam respectively, chapters four to six cover the contemporary movements, namely Neo Tradition Religion Movement (NTRM), Pentecostalism and Salafism. The authors provide an alternative understanding of the African religions in sub-Saharan Africa as historical, diverse, practical, and dynamic. This is opposed to western missionary constructions which treated African religion as rudimentary and backward. Thus, understanding and presentation of religion in this book is done in the "ways practised and manifested in African context" (p. 2). African indigenous religion, for example, is understood in this book as a meaningful belief system which is ethnically oriented, but more world centred (pp. 22, 25, and 31). Also, the authors revelled that Islam has a long history from 7th century and has many adherents in East, North and West Africa. There have been local syncretism of African tradition and Islam including the Sufi tradition and the global Islamic development such as reforms to Salafism. Christianity, on the other hand, is Africanized by its long history from 1st century in North Africa to the contemporary Pentecostalism. The three religious traditions dealt with in this book have co-existed and shaped each other. The book shows, for example, that the emergence of NTRM which began during the

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colonial period created a balance between the previous African beliefs and the new religions. Some of these movements such as Dozo of Ivory Coast and Kimbanguism of Congo overlapped with Islamic and Christianity teaching in a selective way to suit the needs of the religious community. Also, African agency is explained in Christianity using translation of liturgy to different languages, using African teachers and later African church leaders as well as formation of African initiated churches with the taste of Christianity and indigenous aspect. The authors show that the overlapping of indigenous religion with Christianity and Islam suggests that the dividing line between religious practices among Africans is not easily drawn. For example, while in one time or the other Muslims and Christians engaged in traditional religious aspects, the degree and perception of involvement differ from one person to another. Though Christianity and Islam have co-existed with indigenous African religion, they have also been a source of tearing it down as the followers are made to see African traditional religion as sinful and backward.

The remaining nine chapters (7 to 15) enlighten the readers on the role of religion in Africa as an aspect to understand other spheres of life. Themes in the second part focus on cross-cutting issues related to religion which reveal the impact of religions in Africans daily lives. They articulate the multiple engagement of religion with the themes such as politics, health and healing, media, gender, sexuality, and witchcraft. Regarding diseases, health, and healing, for example, the authors show that the three religions on one hand affect health and healing process. Sometimes patients absconded medication due to spiritual healing. On the other hand, "both Christian and Muslim faith-based hospitals and clinics are estimated to provide over 30 per cent of Africa's healthcare" (178). Also, while African religion is given the same status as witchcraft by the Muslims and Christians, it is also highly consulted secretly and openly for social problems such as diseases or when one wishes to retain political powers or gain leadership position.

Also, the authors have been able to show the relationship between religion, conflict, development, and well-being of the continent. Whereas religion is a source of conflict such as Rwanda genocide of 1994, Salafi jihadist groups wars such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabaab in Somalia (pp. 139,142), it is also the weapon for peace resolution. Religious organizations such as Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims and Liberia Council of Churches in Liberia acted against conflict minded groups (p. 145). In another instance religious organizations contribute to social and economic welfare. They provide teaching which connects poverty and material prosperity with religion which in one way or the other boost or hinder development in Africa.

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Moreover, the authors managed to unveil the meeting and diverging points of the three religions in Africa. This work shows great correlation of three religions and how Africans position themselves in religion or switch from one understanding of religion to another based on their problems. Mobutu Seseseko, a Christian, abandoned Christianity for indigenous African religion for political reasons (p.137).

The authors' initiatives to include major religious traditions and their dynamic themes in one monograph is the other success of this book. The book eases the task and opens the field for undergraduate students who are still positioning themselves. The consulted literature, author's experiences and research in Africa provide practical rather than theoretical understanding of religion. The authors also have succeeded in creating a balance between three religious' traditions. Each chapter addresses the involvement of each tradition both positively and negatively and the impact they have been making in Africa. In addition, the addressed themes mirror the expertise and research areas of the authors, hence making them deep and interrelated. However, these choices affect the case studies as they mostly fall on the authors respective areas of studies. Thus, some chapters such as chapter 15 on media and popular culture have, to a large extent, examples, and case studies from West Africa. Again, the identified themes such as witchcraft, politics, disease, health, and healing have many commonalities which could be treated together to avoid repetition. In addition, some areas deserve more attention. For example, Islam in South and Central Africa is mentioned in passing reference due to minority of Muslims. Also, other Islamic traditions such as Shiism which are glossed over because of its minority status could be hinted on.

Overall, the book provides a general picture of history and practices of religions in Africa. This book is recommended for the beginners of religious subject, ideologies, and practices in African context. The author's initiatives to address contemporary issues in African context have not only updated and contributed knowledge to the field of religion and African studies but they have also positioned the book in the current debates such as religion, poverty and underdevelopment or religions and conflicts in Africa. As the authors admit in their introduction, one monograph cannot exhaust the rich and diverse African religions, but it offers a direction and signposts for those interested in research and deep studies on themes and study areas highlighted in this book. Monographs on specific religions and specific themes for undergraduate students are also important to widen their understanding and choices.

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