Book Review


This book does not fulfill the promise set forth in its title or the goals outlined in the editors’ introduction to ‘cover the centrality of space as fundamental to Black/African culture, identity, personhood, and spiritualities’. Instead some of the chapters do not even address the topic of sacred space. The book is also so riddled with typographic and citation errors that if it were a boat it would surely sink. Most of the authors’ approach to sacred spaces is resolutely Durkheimian and functionalist; sacredness is a social expression of respect which ultimately leads back to social and ecological order. Sacredness leads to sacredness via African societies because it must and because they need it to. The scholarship on sacred space in Africa has, however, moved well away from this colonial-era approach. This review summarizes this frustrating text and offers some suggestions for the study of African sacred spaces.

The editors’ introduction provides lucid summaries of the chapters (with the exception of the concluding chapter by Oluwasegun Aluko, which is simply not mentioned). It reads much like a book proposal (‘our book…intends to cover’ various topics), and in places it mischaracterizes the actual contents of the volume (for example, it says that Hawwkayoo Zoggyie’s chapter is about two Afro-Caribbean novels, but it only concerns one). The first chapter, by Kevin Young, tells the story of how a Moroccan slave, Esteban de Dorontes, became part of the Spanish conquest of the New World in the sixteenth century. The chapter provides a decent overview of its topic, but it is unclear how it relates to the topic of ‘sacred space’. Julius Adekunle’s offering examines the royal tombs in Igboho, Nigeria. The text is more descriptive than analytical, and tends to accept royal succession narratives uncritically. The third chapter, by Donald Omagu, is perhaps the most problematic one in the book. It argues that the Bekwarra people of Nigeria overspend scarce resources on funerals, but this is not backed up with economic data. How much does a coffin cost, anyway? Instead Omagu draws on evidence about funerary expenses from across Africa so much that it’s difficult to tell what the Bekwarra do and think. The author’s use of the ethnographic present is a poor choice to make sense of a historical political economy issue, especially when he writes of special ‘market days’ for the burial of slaves in the present tense (p. 60). Most troubling, however, is the author’s use of heavy paraphrasing and outright copying to present sentences and paragraphs from non-peer-reviewed websites (cited, but without quotation marks) as his own scholarship. For example, this phrase on page 57 is identical to a web page by Manu Ampim at http://www.manuampim.com/AfricanInitiationRites.htm—…”families and villages
Book Review

in traditional Africa and provide the necessary structure for individual growth and development’. This happens again on page 63 with most of a paragraph lifted from http://www.deathreference.com/A-Bi/African-Religions.html and lightly edited to vary the punctuation but express the same ideas in the same order with mostly the same words, so that the web page’s sentence, ‘It might be argued that “proper” death rites are more a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dying’ becomes ‘“Proper” death rites are more of a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dead’. I would not let my students get away with this, and we cannot accept this sort of academic dishonesty from Lexington Books.

The book recovers from this low point with a chapter by Emmanuel Mbah and Tom Victor Ntui about space and ritual among the Ejagham people of Cameroon. It uses well-organized interview material and secondary literature effectively to delineate a series of gods with particular sacred spaces and ritual performances. Chapter 5, by Muhammadu Mustapha Gwadabe and Muhammad Kyari, is less successful because although it aims to discuss the role of mosques as sacred spaces in Nigerian Islam, it provides an orthodox global perspective on mosques in Islam instead of investigating Nigeria. Co-editor ‘BioDun Ogundayo’s chapter asserts the status of the Yoruba Oda Ifá text as a contribution to world literature, but only arrives at its topic, the spatiality of Opon Ifá geomantic divination trays, at the end. At this halfway point of the book, I was alert for problematic scholarship, so I became curious enough about the map on page 128, purportedly ‘generated by Author’, to search online for the image. I found many exact copies of the map (see, for example, http://gorhistory.com/hist110/enslaved.html), none with any indication that Ogundayo was the author.

Chapter 7 by Enoch Olujide Gbadegesin also concerns Yoruba spirituality, and focuses on the significances of mountains in Yoruba religion and syncretic Christian practices. The chapter regularly dips into the classics by Mircia Eliade, Victor Turner, and Malcolm X, but does not have a consistent focus on Nigerians. In the eighth chapter by Saheed Balogun Amusa, we discover how the bureaucratic control and the political economy of cultural tourism have affected orthodox meanings and ritual practices in the Osun Osogbo sacred groves in Nigeria. It follows a well-traveled track in arguing that spaces and practices that had been socially, ecologically, and spiritually functional are now under threat by modernity. Other than the two Latin American chapters, Fortune Sibanda’s Chapter 9 is the sole non-Central/West African case study in the book. The author argues that a new term, Indigenous Ways of Knowing (IWK), helps to account for resource use taboos in eastern Zimbabwe. The ancient elders (from ‘time immemorial’) had set up these taboos in order to live in harmony with nature, and this should inform conservation practice today.

The book concludes with three vastly different chapters. The title of Chapter 10, by Hawwkayoo Zoggyie, is ‘Space, art, and religion in Changó, el gran putas,’ yet the terms ‘space’ and ‘art’ do not appear in the actual text (which argues that the novel Changó by the Afro-Colombian author Manuel Zapata Olivella is about Black resistance against spiritual alienation). I do not understand why this chapter is in this book. Chapter 11 returns to Nigeria to describe how sacred geographic features in the Hausa area have declined in significance as Nigerian Islam became more orthodox in the twentieth century. Mukhtar Umar Bunza and Adamu Musa Kotorkoshi show that these rocky outcrops had been sites for rituals about prosperity, fertility, and the legitimacy of ruling families. The final chapter by Oluwasegun Aluko examines how
the scarcity of space at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ife-Ife, Nigeria, leads religious groups to hold their services at mundane sites such as the Cricket Pavilion and the Geology Car Park, thus creating sacred spaces. Unsurprisingly, Aluko follows Durkheim in observing that these rituals enhance group solidarity.

This was a frustrating book to read, and I do not recommend it for non-specialists and library collections. A book that really reviews and summarizes the status of African sacred spaces would, I think, take this book’s subtitle as a signpost. It suggests that ‘culture, history, and change’ are the keys to understanding sacredness in Africa. The challenge is to follow this direction critically. Culture in current anthropology is less about Durkheimian social order being reproduced through ritual action; it is more a process that people do to one another. African history is firmly processual, and tends to examine ritual practices alongside oral history and colonial archival documents to show how sacredness emerges from, reproduces, and transforms social arrangements through specific people doing specific things. Early twentieth-century classics in African studies were mostly about social order, but more recent scholarship addresses the tension between continuity and change. What this means for the study of African sacred space is that even the appearance of continuity, such as the persistence of a deity, ritual practice, or way of experiencing the world, should be investigated as an active response to change instead of something simply untouched by it. Taking this book’s subtitle seriously would lead interdisciplinary scholars to examine African sacred spaces (and anything else categorized as ‘traditional’) as ongoing and diverse dynamic processes instead of similar structures threatened by modernity.

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