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A Masquerade Is Not Watched from One Spot

Reassessing the Study of African Religions

Introduction

The search for an adequate methodological approach to the study of African Religions in their multiformity has been a fervent one. This problem has held the attention of scholars of African Religions for years, and may continue to do so (cf. Droogers 1985: 101; Binsbergen 1976: 203). Alyward Shorter rightly asserts that "without an adequate methodology, the riches of African Religion cannot be revealed and the scholar is tempted to despise the little he can see" (1975a: 39). Early descriptive approaches were mostly essentialist over-generalizations whereby "African Traditional Religion" was presented as a single entity. They were also influenced by the approach of comparative religion to the study of "religious universals" which examined aspects of African Indigenous Religions in comparison with the same in other world religions. This presents us with an oversimplification of the nature, structure and practices of African Religions, thus glossing over their diversities and complexities.

Early anthropological approaches on the other hand dealt rather with religious systems of particular peoples, digging out important and minute details. They were, however, sometimes fiercely particularistic, and took their functionalist and structuralist quests too far, placing less attention on the interpretation and meaning of religious symbols and iconography.

Religion, however, should be studied in context, unlike the decontextualized approach to African Religions used by some earlier scholars. In this paper, a multidimensional approach to studying African Religions is proposed; an approach that can cope with the emphasis placed today on multidisciplinary. Part of the author's work on selected festivals of Jos Plateau peoples is reflected here, using particu-

larly the concept of masquerades¹ to demonstrate this multidisciplinary approach. In assessing the study of African Religions, therefore, the subject matter is approached from a number of angles, since "one does not watch a masquerade from one spot" because of its mobility and complexity. The historical factor and its presence in this work is demonstrated in the use of masquerades, both for the reenactment, and as depositories of history, by most Jos Plateau ethnic groups. This helps in understanding the interplay between diachronic and synchronic approaches in the study of African Religions. In Jos Plateau festivals, attention is shifted away from preconceived rigid, *ahistorical* notions of African Religions, seen in God, gods, ancestors, and spirits, to the dynamic fluidity of history. In the cyclic festivals, life is seen as much more fluid, and responding to change. It is *historical* and not *ahistorical* in nature.

Moreover, when we look back at the approaches of previous scholars, an important theme is completely missing from their works, namely, gender as a category. It is clear that they used categories and "wore *blinkers*" that blinded them to gender issues. Gender is related to and permeates other spheres of human life, such as politics and power, economics, social and religious relationships. It is not a part left out which can be added or "fixed" later on. The problem is more radical than that, because, if gender is left out, the whole picture of religious history is marred, thus flawing the whole study. Gender relations are part of everyday reality, and taking gender seriously as a category of analysis furnishes us with unheard voices at the grass roots, and shifts attention from the official version of religious leaders. Women, for instance, are more active in areas considered marginal, even though they may be more powerful and powerfully involved than the people at the centre. This paper demonstrates why the study of African Religions should pay attention to gender issues.

Like gender, art as a paradigm of scientific investigation has also been glossed over by previous scholars of African Religions. This paper assesses an icon, (the whip) present in Jos Plateau peoples' festivals, using the approach of history of religions. Emphasis is also placed on the hermeneutics of icons and iconography. Finally, the insider/outsider approach to field work is also addressed, pointing out problem areas usually faced by an "insider". The politics of studying African Religion in a country like Nigeria, and the nature, structure

¹ The term masquerade does not in this case imply a procession, but denotes, among others, the incarnation cult of ancestors which exist among many African communities.

and activities of the department of religious studies in the University of Jos (Nigeria) are presented.

This paper is divided into six sections: The introduction forms the first. The second uses the art of masquerading to illustrate why a masquerade is not watched from one spot. It also examines attempts at reviving indigenous religions, using examples from strange arts of masquerading on the Jos Plateau as a challenge to the study of religious change. In the third, a critical survey of approaches used by scholars in studying African Religions is made.

Approaches to the study of African Religions today are proposed in the fourth section. These are polymethodic and multidimensional approaches, the contextual study of African Religions, the historical approaches (demonstrated in the art of masquerading), the need to balance synchronic and diachronic approaches, the use of art and iconography in the study and female studies. The fifth focuses on studying African Religions as insider. This section examines the problems of the "insider" and the politics of doing research in history of religions in a Nigerian university. The conclusion strongly recommends a multidisciplinary approach for studying African Religions.

The Step of the Masquerade is the Step of the World

Ogotomeli taught that the society of masks is the entire world. And when it moves onto the public square it dances the step of the world. Because all men, all occupations, all foreigners, all animals are carved into masks or woven into hoods (Griaule 1938: 179; cf. Dieterlen 1989: 34; Hackett 1996: 34).

The step of the leafed masquerade is believed by the Mupun and Ngas ethnic groups of the Jos Plateau as well as the Dogon (see quotation above) to be the step of the world. If this is true, then the dance of the masquerade is also the dance of the world. To learn the steps of the masquerade is to know the ways of the world. The world is wide, high and complex. The masquerade does not only use the whole world as its theatrical stage, but regards its performance as a part of the re-enactment of the movements of the cosmos. Furthermore, it provides a medium of interaction between humans and the spirit world. This clearly presents a picture of the masquerade as an object of marginality, the reverser of normality and abnormality. To watch the masquerade spectacle and drama as play, religious rite, and festival performance, one certainly cannot fully comprehend this

complex scenario, nor grasp the complete meaning of its functions in society, if one watches it while rooted in one spot or only observes one particular aspect of it.

The masquerade symbolizes the world which is sometimes equated with a market. Why is the world a market? The leafed masquerade performs in the market square, and in the town. This is also true for example of Yoruba masquerades, where birds atop the masks commonly symbolize transformative power and night-time activities (Hackett 1996: 133 f.; Drewal and Drewal 1983: xv; Campbell 1992). The world is a market because a market has a beginning (in the morning) and an end (in the evening) and so does all life. A market day has a fixed pattern of recurring (after every four, five or seven days), and human life is believed to go through rites of passage and rebirths. A market symbolizes transformation, and the power to transform, both of which are represented in the world. More importantly, a market symbolizes the world in a miniature form. It is an object of marginality, because it is a meeting point of both human beings and spirits. It is a place where all manners of persons, goods and spirits meet, either by day or by night. For this reason, the masquerade may walk along the road, perform dances and drink beer in the market square or the palace, and thereafter return to its grove. When it performs in a palace or compound, it is limited to the arena outside the houses. Its mobility, therefore, entails that the watcher of the masquerade spectacle follows it "throughout the world" to have better sight-lines of its performance. The scholar too, in a sense, cannot grasp the whole picture of what s/he is researching if s/he employs a single methodology of data collection and analysis.

On the Jos Plateau, the symbolism of the leaf masquerade — *Nanyim* "the female leafed one", or "the female owner of leaves" — among the Mupun, demonstrates not only the movement of the world, but its antiquity and the antiquity of ancestor beliefs among the people. A male masquerader wearing female clothing, i.e. leaves, which were worn in traditional times only by females, symbolizes the oldest of the masquerades. It points to pre-historic times when women wore leaves and men animals' skin. But *Nanyim* comes out carrying male objects, i.e. two long whips! The symbolism of whips and whipping points to a phallic object of fecundity, fertility and potency, especially when used on women. Women do not consciously think of mating while using the phallic pestle in pounding food stuff in the utrine mortar, or while stirring food in a (utrine) pot suspended on a tripod over a fire, with a (phallic) stick. Unlike them, a barren woman may actually refuse to run away from a masquerade until she has been beaten by it. Whereas, her child-bearing peers

would not behave in the same way. This is done in the belief that the whip carried by a leafed masquerade has the power to offer fertility to women.

When masquerades use whips on children, it is in the form of play, between temporary returning ancestors and those already reborn in the children. The shades and children are both friends and peers. The whipping of certain children by masquerades may, however, assume a playful form of enforcing discipline. However, when whips are used on men, it is done mutually, and without inhibition as a taste of manhood. Among the Ngas of the Jos Plateau, for example, during *mostar* "the beer festival of the moon", a group of youths called *jep tarmwa*, "the children of the moon", come out with whips in their hands and with their bodies painted white. They mercilessly beat each other, as they run and chase people they find on their way to the dancing square. People run "helter skelter" but still turn up in the square for the *mos tar* dance. The whipping is also carried out at dawn, signalling the end of *mostar* festival (Danfulani 1996: 45). In a Mangun first fruit festival, young men engage themselves in combat using plaited jute ropes, which make snappy sounds and can hit hard. This festival is held to test manhood and endurance. Through it men attract the love of girls to themselves (Danfulani 1996: 47).

When used by a masquerade performing in public, the whip becomes an object of marginality and liminality; it tells of the sacred nature and authority of the user, the visitor from the world of the spirits. It demarcates sacred space, i.e. the space immediately around the masquerade, from secular space. Even as the sacred travels into profane world of humans, it must maintain and transport a sacred space around itself. This space, which is dangerous to humans must be demarcated and the reach of the whirling whips assure and maintain its existence.

Recent Attempts at Reviving African Religions on the Jos Plateau: A Challenge to Scholars

Attempts are being made by some elders and youths in some communities on the Jos Plateau to revive traditional religion. A number of factors have led to this state of affairs. Some persons who converted from traditional religion to Christianity in this century converted back to traditional religion. Others remained nominal Christians, participating in major ritual activities of their communities. The call for revival of African culture in Nigeria, which reached its apogee with FESTAC 1977, led to the revival of cultural dances, use of traditional names, traditional titles and the rites and rituals asso-

ciated with them. Moreover, the hard economic crunch resulted in a high unemployment rate. The 1981 and 82 droughts forced the government in 1983 to embark upon the policy of a "back to the land" call. A massive response to that call led to urban rural migration. Most of the youths who returned were disillusioned by urban life and disappointed in the western system of education because they were unemployed. Faced with the stark realities of rural life, some of them are turning to the traditional religion, as a reaction to their disillusionment with everything western. They are discovering something better which has always been there — the religion of their forefathers.

Perhaps the deities may not be revived individually, but some of their rites, feasts and festivals are being observed. Animal sacrifices are being performed in their honour collectively, some of their shrines are being repaired, and ancestor veneration is being revived in the observation of various mask festivals. However, in reviving aspects of traditional religion, the dynamic nature of culture is proving to be an obstacle in the way of arriving at a credible form of the tradition in "the way it was practised by our forefathers." This point is illustrated by three examples from the art of masquerading on the Jos Plateau. Among the Mupun, a celebrated case was reported in the late 1980s where Christians had to remind adherents of Mupun traditional religion that in the past, *nwong* masquerades used whips for play and not stones. This was subsequent to an incident where a stone throwing masquerader appeared near the house of a Pastor and started hurling stones at the house. There was also the case of a masquerader that invariably got drunk in its regalia in Mupunland, while another who turned into a "macho man" was accidentally crushed to death by a passing motor car in Pankshin town. These acts are abominable to the cult, so these persons or their parents were fined accordingly for defiling indigenous religions. These cases illustrate the care the scholar of African Religions should take in observing innovative and changing patterns in indigenous practices over time.

The concept of leaves and whips (already examined) form only one aspect of *Nanyim* the leafed masquerade of the Mupun. The role of masquerades as agents for explaining religious change (discussed above) and as depositories of history (discussed below) form only a small part in the study of masquerades. As demonstrated in *Pebbles and Deities* (Danfulani 1995), this author is working of a new book,

Festival as Performance (to be published next year),² where major festivals and masquerades of some Jos Plateau peoples are presented from the following various angles and using historical, anthropological and phenomenological approaches. The Mupun have many other masquerades, most of them female. This study approaches the concept of masquerades from various angles, analyzing their myths of cosmology and taxonomy. Their function as a mechanisms for socio-political control and crisis management, and as agents for explaining death, spirit possession and ancestorhood is discussed. The role of masquerading in boosting tourism is also assessed in relation to the ills and advantages of tourism. While the ambivalent relationship between masquerades and women, and the question of whether women are really ignorant of the secrets of male masquerade cults is considered. It is clear that a single method cannot adequately lead to a scientific analysis of this concept.

A Survey of the approaches to the Study of African Religions

A synopsis of approaches to the study of African religions is examined in this section. In sketching a history of approaches to the study of African Religions, Jan Platvoet observed two major levels and developments: Scholars who see Africa as *object* and those that see it as *subject* (1996: 108 ff.). He examines the historical development of each of these two groups chronologically in three phases (from trader to academic anthropologist; then missionaries of liberal persuasion and recent historical studies). On Africa as *object*, the works of amateur ethnographers form the first level, being dominated by the reports of “traders, slavers, travellers, missionaries, military men, and colonial administrators” about African customs. “Academic anthropology” is the second level which follows. However, a diachronic perspective is absent in their works because functionalist theories of the day were *ahistorical*, using an “‘ethnographic present’ which fixed African traditional ‘societies’ -and their religions- synchronically” (Platvoet 1996: 110).

The Kenyan anthropologist, journalist, playwright and critic, Okot p'Bitek vehemently criticized the “Judaean-Christian spectacles” of

² This author is spending a year's fellowship period from the *Alexander von Humboldt Foundation* at the University of Bayreuth, Germany writing this book.

European scholars and African scholars for “hellenizing” African traditional concepts of God by “smuggling” the metaphysical concepts of Greek and Christian scholasticism, such as “omnipotent”, “omniscient”, etc. into African beliefs, thereby employing African deities “as mercenaries in foreign battles” (Platvoet 1996: 121; cf. p’Bitek 1971). In this type of African scholarship, “Western binoculars are used in examining African Religions, with Hellenistic and Christian categories providing the view finders” (Kalu 1991: 92). Ikenga-Metuh shares the position of p’Bitek, but thinks that he went too far in his criticism, since African religions are like and unlike Western religions (Ikenga-Metuh 1985: 1 ff.; cf. Ikenga-Metuh 1982).

Bolaji Idowu’s “unitary ideology” has influenced many scholars and unfortunately still holds sway in many Departments of Religious Studies in Anglophone Africa. This comparative, synchronic, unitary “African Traditional Religion” (ATR) model, until recently impeded the historical study of African traditional religions. That paradigm was not only pan-africanist in its ideology, but also decontextualizing in its approach.³

Historical studies of African Religions were established late, appearing only in the 1960s and 70s, and African researchers are as yet few (Platvoet 1996: 115 ff., 117 foot note 73, 126). However, “regional and historical approaches are now challenging the hegemony of unitary ATR” (Platvoet 1989: 113 ff., 1996: 126; cf. Mbon 1996; Olupona 1996). Onunwa divides African approaches to African Religions into early African Nationalist writers, pre-independent writers, and indigenous Christian scholars of African Religions (1991: 110 ff.).

Alyward Shorter provides eight approaches to studying African Religions, demonstrating how they have been used by scholars of African Religions; exposing their strengths and weaknesses (1975a: 39 ff., cf. 1975b). He posits that the particularistic, enumerative and hypothesis of unity approaches have grave drawbacks. While the historical, limited comparative, categorical and thematic approaches possess more advantages than the former three, Shorter recommends

³ This is because of its religionist inspiration; specifically, the overriding need to use research in religion for the development of African (Christian) theologies; the accepted division of fields of study in the academy which assigned the historical study of African Religions to (historical) anthropology, art, and political or social history, while the *atemporal* systematic comparative, and crypto-theological one is assigned to Religious Studies (Platvoet 1996: 128). Thus anthropologists such as Paul Bohannan and historians such as J. A. F. Ajayi and E.A. Ayandele have produced some of the classic works on religion in Nigeria.

multidimensional approaches which combine the strengths of the last four. Harold W. Turner shares the same concern for a review of how African Religions should be studied (1981). This informs his position that the study of African Religions, like any other religion, requires the distinctive religious discipline of phenomenology of religion. This, he contends, should complement the anthropological, sociological and psychological approaches which focus primarily on the factors/milieu which condition religion, rather than on the religious phenomena themselves. These are thus merely ancillary to phenomenology and the history of religions which they study as distinctive human phenomena (Turner 1981: 1). Harold W. Turner concludes that the academic study of Religions is by “ ‘the nature of the field’ a multidisciplinary and polymethodical enterprise”, because “religion is a human activity and experience that is liable to be interwoven with all aspects of human life; {...} its study, therefore, requires, sooner or later, all the human sciences” (1981: 5). Platvoet (Turner 1981: 128 f.) sees good examples of this polymethodological approach to the study of African traditional religions in Olupona’s study of sacral kingship among Ondo Yoruba and this author’s *Pebbles and Deities*.

Proposed Approaches to the study of African Religions

As indicated earlier, the scholar of African Religions is comparable to an observer of a masquerade performance, who cannot observe the spectacle rooted in one spot. Thus there are no two scholars that have used a method or a number of them in exactly the same way. Lévi-Strauss is, therefore, correct when he said,

I don’t pretend at all that, because I think that way, I am entitled to conclude that mankind thinks that way too. But I believe that, for each scholar and each writer, the particular way he or she thinks and writes opens a new outlook on mankind. And the fact that I personally have this idiosyncrasy perhaps entitles me to point to something which is valid, while the way in which my colleagues think opens different outlooks, all of which are equally valid (1978: 4).

The Study of African Religions should be Multidisciplinary

Combining anthropological and phenomenological approaches with the historical has been proposed and carried out by a number of scholars of African religions, among them David Westerlund 191991:

18, Emefie Ikenga-Metuh (1984; 1985; 1991), Jacob Olupona (1991) and this author (1995). Combining the anthropological approach with the phenomenological is plausible and indeed, Michael Bourdillon rightly states that “social anthropologists have for a long time been prominent in the phenomenological study of African religions” (1996: 139). He states further that though some anthropologists have taken a positivist approach which seeks to explain rather than interpret, there are others “who try sympathetically to understand religion from the viewpoint of the participants” (Bourdillon 1996: 139). This is because data, the basis of our understanding, possesses limitations we need to recognize, the most obvious being those “of time and space.” He asserts that

You can only see and hear a limited amount. Even if you are studying a particular ritual which you can attend from beginning to end and which involves a small group of people who are present throughout the ritual, you are still not able to see what all the people do in preparation before, and after, the ritual. You cannot attend all similar rituals, and you may miss significant alterations or emphases which give meaning to the ritual only when understood against others. Rituals acquire meaning in a social context, and our access to that context is always limited. Our data is further limited by the cognitive baggage that we bring to observation...the very category in which we place the data involves bias (Bourdillon 1996: 139).

Furthermore, Ikenga-Metuh advocates the use of anthropological approaches together with phenomenological and theological ones (1991). He states, however, that

The search for a methodology of studying African religions has been hampered by the assumption that African religion is so radically different from the major world religions that it requires a different type of study and a completely different methodology...African religion, like other religions, can be studied from different perspectives. There could be an anthropological, psychological, phenomenological or theological study of African religion. The methods used in anthropological studies are not identical with methods of phenomenological or theological studies. From this view, the study of African religions is polymethodical (1991: 148).

Harold W. Turner combines phenomenological and theological approaches in his study of places of worship (1979). While Olupona asserts that “from my field work experience...I shall propose a phe-

nomenological-hermeneutical investigation and interpretation of the mythological" (1991: 28). He states further,

In recent times, the study of African traditional religions tended towards phenomenological-anthropological models. That is, a focus on field-work based materials and critical appraisal of the materials from phenomenological and anthropological perspectives. The procedure by which phenomenological investigation is accomplished has been described as a two-tiered process of 'morphological phenomenology' and 'hermeneutical phenomenology' (Olupona 1991: 29; cf. Brenneman, Yarian and Olson 1982: 14).

Two levels of phenomenological approach is attainable in data analysis. The first is classification, typology and structuralization of data collected from field work. The second is that of deciphering the meaning tacitly residing within religious phenomena being examined. Discussing the second level, Helfer asserts that

The history of religion, as other disciplines, is grounded in an hermeneutical situation, that is an interpretative framework which establishes the possibility and limit of critical analysis and creative synthesis. The hermeneutic situation establishes the problems and provides the heuristic devices which determine the purpose of using a particular method and the manner in which it is used (Helfer 1968: 1, 2; cf. King 1995: 121).

Phenomenology is the articulation of the nature, structure and meaning of man's religious experience. Its articulative method is based on historical and systematic inquiry into concrete religious configurations, past, and present, pre-historic and historic. It arrives at the "integral understanding" of religious phenomena within the framework of history of religions (Kitagawa 1968: 200). It involves the interpretation, understanding and the meaning of religious symbols (King 1995: 123 ff.).

Scholars argue over the possibility/impossibility of a phenomenological study of religion (cf. Jensen 1993; Gilhus 1994). The controversy over reductionism (cf. Segal 1983; Pals 1986), and the contemporary tendency to sweep the phenomenological approach under the carpet as a "universalist school of thought" that was brought to age by Mircea Eliade is well known to us. Jeffery Dippmann has written an article in support of reductionism (1991) which was countered by Lome Dawson (1993), while Idinopulos and Yonan in *Religion and Reductionism* (1994) edited a number of papers on this controversy with contributors belonging to both sides of the divide. These not-

withstanding, the phenomenological approach is still a useful tool for data collection, classification and interpretation. James Cox provides a useful blueprint, going over six steps, for collecting and analyzing data using the phenomenological approach (1996: 167, cf. 1992: Chapter two). His advice to the researcher to develop *epoche* and *emphaty* to religious phenomena during the stage of data collection — not to tamper with religious phenomena, but to describe it from the insider view of the *homo religiosus* — and cultivate methodological conversion as scientific inquiry, as opposed to confessional conversion, helps to integrate the scholar who comes from the “outside”, as “insider” (Cox 1996: 163 ff.). Of importance also is the need to cultivate critical ability to delve in minute detail into the hermeneutics, i.e. interpretation and meaning of religious beliefs, symbols and rituals (Cox 1996: 163 ff.; cf. King 1995: 123 ff.) of the data collected from the field using a combination of anthropological and phenomenological methods.

A multidisciplinary approach which employs the historical, anthropological and phenomenological approaches⁴ is thus a more practical approach to the study of African Religions. Droogers states that “for eclectic purposes a meta-model, a model of models is needed” (1985: 123). This he refers to as the semantic (functionalist, intellectualist, and neo-marxist) model. Fabian underlined the need for the development of African models or approaches to the study of religion (1979: 11). While Fernandez correctly states that “we learn most about the religious thought and intentions involved if, instead of imposing molar concepts and the vocabulary of macro-analysis, we proceed from them to what they imply” (1978: 215). And in interpretative ethnography, Droogers encourages listening and speaking, i.e. discursive and critical narrative rather than just observing. He contends that we need a sharper and deeper historiographic consciousness (1985: 123).

The Contextual Study of Religion

Religion should be studied in context. This not only presupposes a rejection of the decontextualized approach, but a thorough understanding of the cultural matrix and contextual *sitz im leben* of the religion of the people under study. Perhaps a guided return to anthropological focus on field work, the use of primary materials, understanding of a peoples’ culture particularly through a good command of their language and thought patterns will be very useful.

⁴ These may also be referred to as polymethodic/multidimensional approaches.

This will enable the researcher to do two things. Firstly, to use original African terms where Western categories may be found misleading or inadequate to express them, and secondly, to place these terms within their African contextual frames (p'Bitek 1971; Westerlund 1985: 87 ff.; Ikenga-Metuh 1982: 14; Ikenga-Metuh 1985: 1 ff.), where "religion is so much part of every day life that its isolation as a distinct area of study can be questioned" (Bourdillon 1996: 140). It is against this backdrop that a scholar who studies an African Religion without understanding the language in which it is expressed should know that s/he is not yet fully prepared for the task at hand.

Furthermore, the choice of a limited theme, for instance, applying the Limited Thematic Approach suggested by Alyward Shorter, may allow for insightful studies and place the study of African Religions within its African context. This may be pursued further by encouraging younger scholars to take up neglected themes in the History of Religions, such as gender and cross gender issues, and art history, particularly the study of icons and their meaning. For example, while North American archaeologists like Patricia O'Brien, are thinking that the Nok finds of the Jos Plateau may well represent the oldest iron works in Africa, the Nok artefacts still remain "naked" in the eyes of religious historians because of the inability of scholars to "clothe them" with religious interpretation. In the long run, meaningful interpretations for the Nok artefacts will be found only within a Jos Plateau cultural area, history and religious experience, thus placing them within their contextual environment. In such cases, emphasis should be placed on the search for meaning and interpretation of religious rites, ritual symbols, artefacts and iconography within the framework that they are understood by practitioners themselves.

The Historical Factor in the art of Masquerading

The historical factor and its presence in this work is demonstrated, first in the fact of the cyclic and fluid nature of Jos Plateau festivals, alternating from cropping to harvest and hunting. Secondly, it is proven in the use of masquerades, both for the reenactment, and as depositories, of history in some ethnic groups on the Jos Plateau and in the Benue/Kogi area.

Kasfir points out that the use of artifacts as historical evidence has been advocated for a long time by "Africanist historians" and that ethno-linguistic origins of Jukun masquerades provide evidence about Kwararafa political history (1985: 1). Kasfir also argues convincingly that the "tall ghost", "hooded cobra", or "the mask that

leans", a masquerade found in the Benue valley among the Idoma, Igala and Alago is of Hausa (Abakwariga) origin, and not of Yoruba or Igbira origin as is argued by other scholars. The strength of this argument is based on morphology, linguistic evidence and the mythical journey of masquerades found in Idoma ancestral chants and speeches. Kasfir collected and analyzed such historical chants and recitations of the *alekwu* masquerades of the Idoma. These oral narrations are public lectures, which are part of recounting and reenacting ethnic migration history (1985: 3 ff.).

On the Jos Plateau, pronouncements and speeches of masquerades, in addition to constituting vibrant sources of oral literature, ethical norms and codes of conduct, contain recitations about the origin of the community. These are instances of the encasement and depositing of the peoples' history. Two Ngas masquerades studied by Wambutda are involved in the reenactment and preservation of Ngas history (1982: 99 f.). These are *nwongngan* and *nwong moswong*. Recitation of masquerades in both Idoma and Ngas is thus invaluable in charting the course/routes of migration of a people in pre-literate times (cf. Danfulani 1996: 36 f. and 46).

Masquerades therefore dramatize mythical struggles, courses of events and history, such as migration, and as such give rise to a compendium of oral history and literary texts. Masks and masquerades, therefore, serve as symbols and media of reenacting human history and reality. The dynamic fluidity of history is thus demonstrated in festivals which are repeated in cycles, celebrating life in its response to change.

Balancing the Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches

It is important for scholars of African Religions to draw a balance between the diachronic (historical) and synchronic (comparative) approaches in their research work, while gathering and analyzing research data. On the diachronic level, it is necessary for the researcher to show the historical process which has brought the religious phenomena to its present situation. Lack of adequate diachronic analysis in most works on African religion has inhibited progress in that field (Olupona 1991: 30). One of the ways to remedy this is the diachronic differentiation of chronological levels of field research data according to when they were collected. In Africa, scholars very often carry out research work over a long period of time. One of the most commonly committed mistakes is lack of provision of a "historical given". Secondly, historical data collected ten to twenty years ago, "historical data," maybe lumped together with "contemporary mate-

rials" collected only a few years ago. A "historical given" points clearly to time and space in the history of a people and their religion, while historical data informs us about the degree, factors and reasons for religious change, when it is compared with contemporary materials.

Female Studies; a Neglected Area

Female imagery and gender studies in African Religions is a grossly neglected area of study. A few works are just beginning to address this imbalance such as Matory who brings out the beauty of the hidden female power behind the operations of an old Yoruba kingdom (1994), Oduyoye and Kanyoro's *The Will to Arise* (1992) which has a collection of thirteen essays by African women theologians, and Rebecca Cervantes' *Women in Traditional Yoruba Culture* (1985). Paula Ben-Amos (1983), and Pamela A. R. Blakely (1993) among a few others have contributed a great deal to highlighting female voices which have been unheard for a long time. The author is currently working on female imageries in Mupun Religions, a theme which he finds challenging.

Art, Iconography and the Study of African Religions

Art, iconography and aesthetics is important in the study of religion. Art belongs to the religious mentality of Africans, and its techniques may be crucial in generating and sustaining life. For instance, the *zut*, the artistic tuft of hair that is left to grow at the centre of the head of the chiefs of Goemai, M'ship and Garram is believed to sustain the king's power and subsequently that of the people. Writing about this artistic show piece of the *Long Goemai* of Shendam, Neiers asserts that

The Long's badge of dignity is a large ivory pin (about 15 centimetres long and terminating at the uncovered end in a disc about the size of a tenpenny piece). He wears it thrust in a tuft of hair carefully bound by a black ribbon on top of his head. This tuft contains a selection of seeds, the constant carrying of which by the chief is to ensure the fertility of the tribal fields. The Long never lays off this hair-fixture (1979: 76).

Marcel Griaule's interest in religion led him to focus on Dogon masks which he saw as central to their religious world view (Hackett 1996: 15; Ben-Amos 1989: 10). Marcel Griaule thus focussed on the mythological and cosmogonic system insisting that artistic symbols are the key to Dogon metaphysics. This gave birth to a great number of

studies which philosophically utilized mythology and cosmology to analyze art. However, this approach unfortunately led to a tendency to disregard the context and meaning of iconographic and artistic objects (Hackett 1996: 15; Ben-Amos 1989: 11). This explains the drifting apart of experts in the study of African art and religions. Hackett blames the lack of investigation of the visual arts by scholars of African Religions on Western scholarly traditions' quest for "rationality" and "objectivity" and privileging of written texts over visual ones; and on the reluctance of scholars to focus on visual symbols.⁵ The iconology or interpretation of meaning in African Art is important (cf. Drewal 1988). Victor Turner states that art is not only a cognitive system, but it is also "meaningful experience and experienced meaning" (1986: 48). Art is rightly part of the religious and cultural matrix of Africans and expresses aspects of life in toto. When the scholar of African Religions treats the aesthetic qualities of icons as part of data collected from field work and not as "mere fetish", s/he may arrive at a richer and deeper hermeneutical meaning of what they really represent. The scholar of African Religions thus needs either to train additionally as an art historian, or work alongside art historians in order to facilitate inter-disciplinary research and the correct interpretation of religious icons.⁶

Studying African Religions as Insider

Problems of the "Insider"

A consideration of the insider/outsider or emic/etic approaches to field work which highlights the problem areas particularly faced by an "insider" is attempted here. The importance of arriving at a balance between the insider and outsider positions as a researcher of African Religions has been demonstrated by Westerlund who urges the researchers of African Religions, who cannot escape their "outsider" or "reductionist" position to as a matter of priority strive for the "inside

⁵ Hackett states that this attitude stems from Protestant (and Muslim) backgrounds of some African scholars, the Catholics clearly being more disposed to the study of icons. Many draw a fine line between visual imagery used for religious purposes, and that associated with 'paganism' or 'idolatry', since religious images are generally only permitted for educational purposes (Hackett 1996: 15; cf. Goody 1993).

⁶ Hackett's recent work, *Art and Religion* (1996) which the author has quoted extensively, is a good example of one which combines art and history of religions. The bibliography of the book lists current works in both fields.

view" (1991: 20, 23). He compares the approaches of the historian of religion and the anthropologist, questioning whether Western scholars should be seen as "outsiders" and African scholars, "insiders," or whether both Western and African researchers of African Religions should be considered "outsiders", while the adherents and practitioners of African religion be regarded as "insiders".⁷

However, African researchers of African Religions have been faced for a long time with obstacles peculiar to them in the field, precisely because they are "insiders" or are considered as such by their informants. For instance, Bourdillon states that insiders

often do not notice things that seem to us commonplace. For an insider, much of religion is obvious rather than interesting. It takes an outsider to notice things that differ from other religions, and to try to make sense of these differences...the status of insider is not always clear cut (1996: 141).

Thus it is very often the case that outsiders, such as Western researchers, get information either which African scholars could not see, or were denied. Factors giving rise to such a situation is the exotic appeal of strangers to Africans, and their belief, among others, that Western researchers have plenty of money. Some believe that secrets are still kept if revealed to total strangers who take and discuss them far away from home.⁸

The Politics of Doing Research in History of Religions in a Nigerian University

The Religious Studies Department at the University of Jos, which is one of the twenty-five departments of Religious Studies which exist in some thirty-five Nigerian Federal Universities, runs undergraduate programmes in five different areas. These include Christian Studies, Study of Religions, African Traditional Religions, Islamic and Arabic studies. "Scriptural" Islam and Islam in Africa are studied historically in Jos, as in Universities of Ibadan and Ilorin in Nigeria, Durban-Westville, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Bellville in South Africa (cf. Platvoet 1996: 127; Abubakre 1996; Haron 1996).

⁷ Even though a Mupun speaker, the author found himself an "outsider" in Mupun society of diviners and had to learn the decoding language of *kos Pa* divination, while he was conducting research on the subject.

⁸ Perhaps, the Hausa saying about the eye "that belittles only that person that it sees always" is another contributing factor (*Ido wa ki ka raina? Wanda nika gani yau da kulum*).

Apart from phenomenology, anthropology, sociology and psychology courses, which are offered both within and outside the department, as major and elective courses, students can in addition draw elective courses from within the department and also from the Arts, Humanities, and Education.

Jos also runs a Diploma in Christian Studies for mature students and church workers. The MA. and Ph.D Studies programmes constitute the following areas of specialization: African Traditional Religions, Arabic, Biblical Studies (Old and New Testament studies), Church History, Islamology, Inter-faith Relations, and Religion and Society.

Jos has an academic staff strength of almost thirty (including those on study leave, leave of absence and fellowship leave). Three of these are full professors, three are associate professors and others are senior lecturers, lecturers I, II, assistant lecturers and graduate assistants.

Research methodology is taught for two semesters in the Department of Religious Studies, at the University of Jos. Methodology of research is also taught at MA level, but according to the field of research. Students specializing in African Traditional Religions, for instance, have to offer two courses related to the methodology of studying African Religions. These are; *A Survey of Literature on African Religions*, and *Methodology of Studying African Religions*. In addition to these, students have to devote a section of, or a chapter in, their long essay/dissertation to the methodology of research at all levels (BA, MA and Ph.D.). They must isolate, formulate and discuss the methodology they use both in data collection (field work) and data analysis, in a proposal which also examines the aims, justification, the scope and limitation of their work.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ikenga-Metuh conducted field research trips on the Jos Plateau with students offering African Traditional Religions at the 300 level.⁹ However, due to financial constraints, such research trips are no longer conducted. Further, despite the seemingly huge staff strength, many courses in Arabic, Islamology and Philosophy are not taught due to lack of adequate

⁹ The author participated in some of these field trips, both as a student and later as a staff member. During such field trips, students were shown practically how to conduct field research as they worked in groups. Their findings were later analyzed, typed and graded.

staffing.¹⁰ Library facilities have greatly improved with its computerization, but vital works and journals are still lacking.

A pathetic area of the politics of teaching and doing research in Nigerian Universities is poor salary and a hard biting economic crunch. Poor, hungry and frustrated university professors have abandoned serious research in order to fend for their families as they try to make ends meet (cf. Olupona 1996: 186; Gifford 1995: 3). Their students suffer from poor supervision, poor research facilities and constant strikes by students or staff, both academic and non-academic. Part of this frustration and hunger has given rise to several glaring unorthodox practices across Nigerian university campuses.

A gross decrease has been registered over the years in number of students interested in studying religion, partly because of the Federal Government priority of 60/40 students' ratio studying the sciences to humanities. Other factors include the lack of future job prospects, a general economic crunch which does not favour the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and an inferiority complex in students who read religion, leaving mostly only the clergy, who in addition to seminary education are proud to take a more secular degree.¹¹

Furthermore, the *Jos Bulletin of Religion* has not produced subsequent issues after its second volume due to poor finance, and lack of will on the part of the more senior colleagues in the department who are either distracted by administrative load or by economic and research hardships. It is being resuscitated. However, the *Bulletin of African Religion and Culture* (BARC) has remained afloat (though several issues are behind schedule) due to the resourcefulness of its founder and long time editor, Emefie Ikenga-Metuh.

¹⁰ Virtually all staff members are overworked. This grossly affects research, since the time needed for it is taken up by heavy work loads. Many academic staff can not apply for promotion because of lack of publications which results from a lack of incentives and adequate facilities.

¹¹ The 'politics of survival' from the axe of 'rationalization' led to the withdrawal of education students who used to come to the department for major teaching courses such as Old and New testament courses, African traditional religion, philosophy, world major religions, etc. This decision was taken by the Faculty of education in order to justify their need for and recruitment of staff to teach religious education.

Conclusion: A Call for a Multidisciplinary Approach

The multidisciplinary approach is advocated in this paper. The author complementarily combined the historical, anthropological and phenomenological approaches in his *Pebbles and Deities* (1995). Various other approaches across disciplines can and have been successfully combined in other works. There are two ways of preparing for a multidisciplinary approach. The scholar may need to prepare by training in the various disciplines whose approaches s/he wants to use. This will make him/her conversant with the theories and methods obtained in such disciplines and their advantages and disadvantages. This is because it is important to combine only approaches that curb the disadvantages faced in others. The scholar may alternatively choose to work with colleagues in these other disciplines, such that each contributes to a joint work by using his/her skills, approaches and knowledge.

The multidisciplinary approach should also be reflected in the two levels of data collection and analysis of data collected from the field. It is true that some approaches may dominate in the process of field work, whether the qualitative or quantitative method of investigation is pursued, while others may be predominant in the examination of data and the writing process. This however, should be worked out such that the weaknesses of each chosen approach is balanced out by others. This notwithstanding, all approaches proposed in a multidisciplinary work should be clearly seen in the result. When experts look at the work, it should be clearly seen that the approaches of various disciplines are harmoniously and adequately blended into the it.

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