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Review: City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination

Reviewed Work(s): City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination by Jacob K. Olúpònà

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Source: *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Aug., 2013), pp. 109-111

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2013.17.1.109>

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book would have benefited from a clearer distinction between different types of new religious movements and a discussion of the relationship between them.

Despite some shortcomings, *New Religious Movements. A Guide for the Perplexed* also has significant strengths. Through its easy form and language, demanding material is made accessible to readers with little prior knowledge of the subject. There are empirical examples and study questions throughout the book. Following up on the series' promise to treat difficult topics, Oliver particularly addresses issues of dispute such as deprivation of individual freedom, psychological dependency and financial exploitation within NRMs, controversies which are presented and discussed in a nuanced manner. The final chapters address historical and social factors seen as contributive to the upsurge and popularity of NRMs, notably key postmodern trends such as individualism, increased flux of information and the loss of faith in the 'meta narratives' of modernity. The easily accessible, contextual approach makes the book a good introduction for journalists or general readers. However, this *Guide for the Perplexed* is too generalizing and conceptually weak for advanced students of NRMs.

Margrethe Løøv, MF Norwegian School of Theology

*City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination.* By Jacob K. Olúpòṅà. University of California Press, 2011. 356 pages. \$65.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

This masterful work, emerging from decades of dedicated fieldwork and the sensitive insights of a native interpreter, depicts the Yorùbá city of Ilé-Ifè in Southwest Nigeria as a sacred religious center on a par with the sacred cities Jerusalem, Mecca, and Benares. Conceived as the *axis mundi* of Yorùbá traditions, Ilé-Ifè is the mythic locus of the descent of its pantheon of gods (òrisà). The ancient city is the seat of both religious and political authority for the various Yorùbá peoples whose kingdoms are subsumed under the rule of the Ọ̀ṣòni, the "king of kings," understood to be the latest incarnation of the succession of god-kings to have descended to earth, the 201<sup>st</sup>.

*City of 201 Gods* is organized in three parts. Part I, comprised of three chapters, sets out the "imagined" cosmos of Yorùbá myth and its ritual instantiation in Ilé-Ifè. Drawing on archival material, oral history, and archeological evidence, Olúpòṅà attests to Ilé-Ifè's enduring preeminence from Nigeria to Benin, as well as its significance for early explorers, missionaries and scholars. It establishes the interlocking institutions of Ifà divination and sacred kingship as the foundation of Yorùbá identity.

The five chapters that constitute Part II are close ethnographies of festivals celebrating principle divinities. Together they portray a city in which ceremonies are ubiquitous and constant, and self-consciously played out as rival ideologies in embodied form. The thick description of these complex ritual performances vividly portrays them as a living mythology, whose symbolism is the wellspring of the “socio-spatial identity” of the Yorùbá (2). Yet far from static, òrisà traditions are constantly being recast as they grapple with history, facing challenges that ranged from successive incursions by rival African peoples, colonial domination and the trappings of modernity, to the increasingly visible and militant influence of Christianity and Islam. With an uncompromising gaze, Olúpòṅà recognizes that, like other sacred centers, Ilé-Ifẹ̀ has therefore long been the locus of contested power and violent conflict. Ultimately, this work contributes to “a scholarly effort to preserve for posterity” a tradition that Olúpòṅà surmises may not survive the latest pressures of globalization (5). The changing face of the city and the ideological battles that are vying for ground in Ilé-Ifẹ̀ are the subject of Part III.

Olúpòṅà roots his methodological approach in the history of religions, making appeal to classic concepts such as “cosmic navel” and the “sacred canopy.” Yet his intention is to develop “a new and responsible hermeneutic” that challenges Western conceptions by focusing on the “participant-insider” (3-4). Olúpòṅà is an able mediator offering exacting accounts replete with primary oral “texts”: prayers, incantations, proverbs and lyrics both in Yorùbá and English. This treasure trove of material serves as an “indigenous hermeneutics” in its own right, providing clues to how acts are grounded in mythic history. Additionally, in interviews informants explicate ritual symbols and key cultural motifs demonstrating their profound awareness of the meanings of seemingly cryptic acts. Olúpòṅà is also careful to underscore the way indigenous òrisà traditions, Christianity and Islam have infiltrated one another, and highlights how his informants repeatedly co-opted the interpretive models of foreign religions to articulate their worldviews and explain their practices. In so doing, Olúpòṅà bears witness to their reflexivity while adding a multi-vocal dimension to his work. In this way, Olúpòṅà brings together “two often unrelated theoretical discourses – the hermeneutics of the indigene. . . and anthropology of religion” (137).

Concern for issues of gender and power also characterizes this work. Throughout, Olúpòṅà subverts the usual patriarchal interpretation of mythology surrounding goddesses, challenges Western conceptions of gender, and considers the critical role and status of women, a subject usually neglected by “the prevailing male-centered scholarly discourse surrounding Yorùbá religion” (203).

The final two chapters analyze the greatest challenge yet facing òrisà religious tradition: the transnational “second wave” missionary movements and their uncompromising demands for religious exclusivism.

The adoption of Christian *private* devotion plays out in Ilé-Ifè in ironic ways as *public* revivalist activities literally displace traditional “civil religion.” The decisive role played by women, who comprise 70% of new evangelical movement, is dramatized by the influence of the “born-again” wife of the Ọ̀ṣi, who built a chapel for public worship in the Royal Court. This contest in the heart of Ilé-Ifè led to the Ọ̀ṣi renouncing his divine status.

Olúpòṣà suggests it is the African diasporic community that may offer the strongest counterforce for ọ̀ṣi devotees. Now understood as a globally viable religion with strongholds in the Americas and the Caribbean, ọ̀ṣi tradition is drawing strength from “a ‘reverse’ mission” into Ilé-Ifè as a site of pilgrimage (284). The tradition’s most promising strategy for survival appears to be the ability to capitalize on its global status and to mobilize a “transnational quest to see the city’s symbolic significance restored” (293).

There is much to be more thoroughly investigated and explored, and Olúpòṣà’s text has brilliantly opened the way into such still uncharted territory.

Laura S. Grillo, Pacifica Graduate Institute

*The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History.* Edited by Charles B. Strozier, David M. Terman, and James W. Jones, with Katharine A. Boyd. Foreword by Martin E. Marty. Oxford University Press, 2010. xxi + 274 pages. \$99.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

This volume contains interesting analyses that demonstrate that a number of psychologists, psychoanalysts, and historians are arriving at conclusions that are compatible with the work of sociologists and historians of religions who have examined cases of violence involving new religious movements. A historian of religions will wish for greater care in selecting terminology (I put in a request that the term “Manichaeism” be reserved for the specific religious tradition) and more consistency in applying it throughout the essays, but the editors and contributors are to be congratulated for undertaking this interdisciplinary study of what the editors call “the fundamentalist mindset” and its effects.

This volume contains numerous insights of use to researchers in a variety of fields who study religion and violence. Scholars in various disciplines will decide which essays are the most usefully mined for their work. The primary point of agreement in this collection’s essays with the work of new religions scholars concerns the detrimental potential, often actualized, of extremely rigid dualistic worldviews, which may be held by believers, government officials, and law enforcement agents.

The editors designed the book to be an interdisciplinary exploration that takes the five volumes of the Fundamentalism Project directed by