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Article:

van Klinken, A orcid.org/0000-0003-2011-5537 (2020) Teaching & learning guide for: "Religion in African Literature". *Religion Compass*, 14 (12). pp. 1-5. ISSN 1749-8171

<https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12382>

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Teaching & Learning Guide for: “Religion in African Literature”

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This guide accompanies the following article(s):

“Religion in African Literature: Representation, Critique and Imagination”, Religion Compass (details TBC)

Author’s Introduction

The study of religion and literature has so far mostly been concerned with literary texts from Western texts and traditions, and has demonstrated little interest in African literary texts and religious traditions. The study of religion in Africa, on the other hand, has demonstrated little engagement with literature as a methodological entrance to understanding religion as part of African social and cultural life. This study guide aims to open up religion in African literature as an exciting and productive field of study that is of critical interest to students of African literature, religion and literature, and African religions. The focus of this guide is on postcolonial and contemporary Anglophone literature from across sub-Saharan Africa, both relating to indigenous religions, Christianity and Islam as culturally embedded in African histories, cultures and societies.

Recommend readings:

1. Simon Gikandi (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of African Literature*. London: Routledge 2003. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203361269>

A comprehensive reference work on African literature, with over 600 entries on a wide range of historical, cultural and theoretical issues and on prominent writers. Among the entries is one on Christianity (by Simon Gikandi) and one on Islam (by Farouk Topan), with useful overviews of developments and debates.

2. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

A collection of essays by one of Africa’s literary giants, Wole Soyinka, discussing the interconnections of myth, ritual and literary production in Africa. It critically discusses issues such as the influence of Christianity and Islam on African literature, and makes a case for reclaiming indigenous African (specifically Yoruba) Gods.

3. Mark Mathuray, *On the Sacred in African Literature: Old Gods and New Worlds*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2009.

An examination of literary representations of the sacred – such as through myth, ritual and magic – in the writings of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Ben Okri and J.M. Coetzee.

4. Jesse N. K. Mugambi. *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With Particular Reference to the East African Context*. Nairobi: East African Publishers 1992.

The only book-length study of Christianity and African literature, by a leading African theologian. It focuses on East African novels, such as by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Unfortunately this book is no longer available (but it might be in your university library).

5. Susan VanZanten, 'World Christianity'. In Susan M. Felch (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2016, 262-276.

This chapter acknowledges the global nature of contemporary Christianity by focusing on two African literary texts: the poem 'Jesus of the Deep Forest' by Afua Kuma, and the novel *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

6. Emad Mirmotahari, *Islam in the Eastern African Novel*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011.

Study of novels from Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania, analysing the representation of Islam as a central organising presence in socio-political life in the East African region.

7. Shirin Edwin, *Privately Empowered: Expressing Feminism in Islam in Northern Nigerian Fiction*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2016.

Study of novels from northern Nigeria, arguing that these texts do not explicitly critique Islamic patriarchy but narratively show how participation in Islamic ritual allows for Muslim women's 'private empowerment'.

Online Materials:

1. <https://brittlepaper.com/>

Brittlepaper is an online literary magazine dedicated to African literature. It features announcements of new books, interviews with authors, reports about events in the African literary scene, and it publishes texts of fiction, poetry, book reviews, and essays.

2. <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/>

The Johannesburg Review of Books is an independent literary review, publishing reviews, essays, poetry, photographs and short fiction from South Africa, Africa and beyond. In addition to a monthly printed magazine, it published content on its blog, *The JRB Daily*.

3. <https://africasacountry.com/>

Africa is a Country is a website publishing opinion pieces, analysis and commentary, and new writing, on a wide range of African cultural, social and political issues. Although not specifically focused on literature, it frequently features contributions from, or about, African literary writers. Content also provides useful background to social and political issues represented in literary writings.

4. <https://www.jamesmurua.com/>

James Murua's Literary is a prolific blog run by Kenya-based blogger, journalist, and podcaster James Murua. It aims to archive African and black literatures and published on a wide range of aspects of the contemporary African literary scene.

Sample Syllabus:

This syllabus suggests a novel and one or two academic texts for each theme. The selected novels represent different African regions (East, Southern and West Africa), different religious traditions (Christianity, Islam and indigenous religions), and a variety of relevant themes.

Week 1: Indigenous Beliefs and Religious Dis/continuity

Literary text: Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, *Kintu*. Nairobi: Kwani Trust, 2014. (Republished by One World, London, 2018.)

Secondary text: Mariam K. Deme, 'The Supernatural in African Epic Traditions as a Reflection of the Religious Beliefs of African Societies', *Studies in World Christianity*, 16:1 (2010), 27–45. <https://doi.org/10.3366/E1354990110000730>

Week 2: Islam and East African Swahili Culture

Literary text: Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994. (Republished by Bloomsbury, London, 2008.)

Academic text: Emad Mirmotahari, 'Paradises Lost: A Portrait of the Precolony in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*'. Chapter 1 in *Islam in the Eastern African Novel*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011, 27-50.

Week 3: Christian Mission and the Disruption of Colonialism

Literary text: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*. London: Heinemann, 1965.

Academic text: Nicholas Kamau-Goro, 'African Culture and the Language of Nationalist Imagination: The Reconfiguration of Christianity in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child*', *Studies in World Christianity* (2010), 16:1, 6-26. <https://doi.org/10.3366/E1354990110000729>

Week 4: Islam, Gender and Post/coloniality

Literary text: Zaynab Alkali, *The Stillborn*. London: Longman 1995.

Academic text: Shirin Edwin, 'Noetic Education and Islamic Faith: Personal Transformation in *The Stillborn*'. Chapter 2 in *Privately Empowered: Expressing Feminism in Islam in Northern Nigerian Fiction*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2016, pp. 77-106.

Week 5: Christianity, Gender and Post/coloniality

Literary text: Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*. London: The Women's Press, 1988.

Academic texts:

- Ezra Chitando, 'Fact and Fiction: Images of Missionaries in Zimbabwean Literature', *Studies in World Christianity*, 7:1 (2001), 80-94. <https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2001.7.1.80>
- Alison Searle, 'The Role of Missions in *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*', *Literature and Theology*, 41:1 (2007), 498-65. <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frl061>

OR

Literary text: Chimamanda Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*. London: Fourth Estate, 2004.

Academic text: Cheryl Stobie, 'Dethroning the Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy and Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*', *Literature and Theology*, 24:4 (2010), 421-435. <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frq051>

Week 6: Islamic Reformism and Contemporary Religious Change

Literary text: Elnathan John, *Born on a Tuesday*. Lagos: Cassava Republic, 2015.

Academic text: Shirin Edwin, 'Geopolitical and Global Topologies in Fiction: Islam at the Fault Lines in Africa and the World', in Moradewun Adejunmobi and Carli Coetzee (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of African Literature*. London and New York: Routledge 2019, 261-275.

Week 7: Christian Pentecostalism and Contemporary Religious Change

Literary text: Benjamin Kwakye, *The Sun by Night*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006.

Academic text: Michael P.K. Okyerefo, 'Christianising Africa: A Portrait by Two African Novelists', *Studies in World Christianity*, 16:1 (2010), 63-81. <https://doi.org/10.3366/E1354990110000754>

Week 8: Christianity and Queer Sexuality

Literary text: Chinelo Okparanta, *Under the Udala Trees*. London: Granta, 2015.

Academic texts:

- Cédric Courtois, "'Thou Shalt not Lie with Mankind as with Womankind: It Is Abomination!": Lesbian (Body-)Bildung in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015)', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 40:2 (2018), 119-133. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.302>
- Vincent R. Ogoti, 'Soundscape and Narrative Dynamics in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*', *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 13:3 (2019), 291-305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2019.1641647>

Week 9: Indigenous Cosmologies and Modern Identity

Literary text: Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater*. London: Faber & Faber, 2018.

Academic text: Chidi T. Maduka, 'African Religious Beliefs in Literary Imagination: Ogbanje and Abiku in Chinua Achebe, J. P. Clark and Wole Soyinka', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 22:1 (1987), 17-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198948702200103>

Focus Questions

1. Discuss the ways in which different writers and novels represent how Christianity and Islam relate to African indigenous religions and cultures. What are the levels of continuity and discontinuity reflected in literary texts?
2. Prominent African writers such as Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have been firm in their critique of Christianity for its connection to colonialism. In what ways does the current generation of up-and-coming writers echo and/or move beyond those critiques?
3. What is the ongoing relevance of indigenous religious cosmologies, beliefs and practices, as depicted in contemporary African writing?
4. How is contemporary religious change represented in relation to Islam and Christianity? Are terms such as "fundamentalism" and "extremism" helpful or not to understand these dynamics?
5. What are the differences and similarities in the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality are depicted in literary accounts of Christianity and Islam in Africa?
6. Research the religious autobiographies of a literary writer, and how this has shaped and is reflected in their writing.

Seminar Activity

Divide the class into groups and assign each group a novel to read closely and discuss critically. Each group prepares a presentation about the ways in which the novel represents, critiques, and imagines particular religious traditions, beliefs or practices.