

## Afterword by Mercy Amba Oduyoye

I am fascinated by the naming of Africa as Sheba, a wise woman. One who judged Solomon to be wise can surely guide us to the habitation of wisdom. Though the image of the continent beyond her shores is often negative, the myths and legends of the continent sport many wise men and women, a proud people whose memory Mandela identifies as what asserts itself to give us hope. Africa's hope for life is being offered to the global community through this anthology. Myths and legends have preserved for us the memory of wise women who led their peoples out of troubles into life-enhancing situations.

*The Word of Wisdom* highlights the ecological aspects of the wisdom of Africa and brings to life Isaiah's saying that the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The moral values, spirituality and religion of Africa that were once disparaged as primitive paganism are being recognized as the core of ecological sanity. Being an anthology it challenges all to read about Africa and to do so from its beginnings found in the papyri and parchments of antiquity as well as told in oral literature.

Armed with perspicacity and wit, Shelagh Ranger has wandered through some fifty-eight books to select excerpts on animals and nature that capture African religious thought. The anthology introduces students of theology to Africa's traditional wisdom regarding God's creation and the relationship that human beings have, or should have with other animals. The variety is impressive, some are serious, some are playful, but all are deep and thought provoking. The myths, stories and legends provide a good example of learning through play as from tales. We learn of African Christianity which pre-dates European Christianity and of African Islam that predates its establishment in Mecca. The two are therefore no less religions of Africa than the primal Religions they have sought to transcend and to replace. The African Jewish heritage is acknowledged not only through Ethiopia, but in the fact that there have been Jewish settlements in Africa, that have left a mark, for example, in Elephantine.

We therefore have the benefit of the wisdom of African Judaism, Coptic and Ethiopian Christianity, Christianity of the African coast of the Mediterranean sea (North Africa), African Islam and the Cosmic Religions of Africa. All these contribute to the spinning of threads for theology that can be woven from nature, the earth, mountains, rivers, animals, plants as living entities and their interaction with human beings.

The book reads like other delightful animal stories with moral overtones for human beings. It is not easy to forget that 'the tameness of lion and tigers can never be trusted.' I love the story of the co-operation of the honey bird and human beings to 'steal' honey and wax from bees. The stories highlight the wisdom of animals in seeking only what is life-sustaining.

The author reminds us that the spirits among whom we live are but the other half of Eve's children hiding from being counted. These spirits and angelic powers as in Islam are concerned for the health of the ecology for the sake of all God's creatures on this planet. Hence both animals and the creatures of the spirit world convey wisdom to humanity.

Ancestral spirits, an aspect of African wisdom that has been most misunderstood, are clearly presented here. Ancestral spirits are the spirits of those who once lived on earth in bodies; they are still human. With them, whether they dwell in the forests, in ponds and rivers, or in the sky, a close relation is kept by all living beings. Indeed they can take the form of other beings in their attempt to communicate with the living. Ancestral spirits are not divinities. In African languages the supreme 'God' is a personal name and does not take the plural, 'gods'. These spirits are believed to have a passion for law and order, the protection of land and the maintenance of ecological harmony.

As we read what Africans have written about Africa, we are confronted with a theology of life, a theology bequeathed to us in the wisdom of Africa, a theology that calls for a re-reading of the anthropocentric, indeed androcentric theology that has passed for two thousand years as the norm in the Western world. Ranger challenges us to intensify our efforts at understanding other primal/cosmic religions and most urgently to learn to be humble about Western Christianity's contribution to the human quest and to seek the spirituality that will enable us to live in harmony with whom we share one ecosystem.

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