

ROBIN HORTON (1932-2019)

Perhaps in response to his 75th birthday, this 'obituary' was written as the draft of a 'vita' in 2007 by Horton's friend and fellow Africanist, J.D.Y. Peel, who predeceased him by four years. Entrusted to Sokari Douglas Camp, it has been edited for content by Richard Fardon and for length by AT. A full version, with Fardon's editorial notes, will be placed at the RAI obituary page <https://therai.org.uk/archives-and-manuscripts/obituaries>.

Robin Horton, among the most original and interesting anthropologists of his generation, was born in 1932. His grandfather, William Samuel Horton, had been one of the first American painters to work in the style of the French impressionists. His father came to England and enlisted in one of the Guards regiments during World War I; he became a British subject and sent his son to Harrow. On leaving Harrow (where he specialized in the natural sciences), RH did national service, which took him to Nigeria to serve as a junior officer with the Royal West African Frontier Force (later the Nigeria Regiment) from 1950-51 in Kaduna. While stationed at Enugu, his personal interest in the Nigerian soldiers under his command offended the racial code then prevailing in West Africa, but led to the contacts which underlay his first published ethnographic work, two articles on aspects of northern Igbo religion and society (1954, 1956).¹ It was while RH was at Enugu that he first met Michael Crowder (the future African historian) who came out to join the battalion: Crowder utterly disregarded the fact that RH had been 'sent to Coventry' by the officers' mess for his breaking of racial taboos. This led to a close friendship that lasted until Crowder's death in 1988.

After national service, RH went up to New College, Oxford, where he read philosophy, psychology and physiology, in which he took a first in 1956. After this he went to University College London (UCL) to pursue anthropological research under Professor Daryll Forde, the leading specialist on West Africa, who suggested that he work on the Kalabari of the Niger Delta. Extraordinarily, in the light of the long years he spent and the intimate connections he established in the Kalabari town of Buguma, he became so dispirited in the early stages that he came close to going back home and giving it all up. After some years writing up and doing some teaching at UCL² (though without completing his doctorate), he returned to Nigeria in 1962 to take up an appointment at the University of Ife (then sited at Ibadan). A great personal tragedy in his life was that his first wife Hanna (who came from Buguma) died in childbirth, and twin baby girls with her, in 1964. It helped assuage his grief that Hanna's little sister Sokari,³ then aged six, came to live with him in his house on Mokola Hill, Ibadan.



Fig. 1. Robin Horton.

Yet the 1960s was also a period of remarkable and varied intellectual productivity for RH. There were two small books or pamphlets on Kalabari religion or culture – *The gods as guests* (1960a) and *Kalabari sculpture* (1965a)⁴ – and a long string of articles on similar themes, some more theoretical (mostly published in *Africa*, the premier journal of African anthropology), others more descriptive (often published with vivid photographs in *Nigeria Magazine*).⁵ These articles promised, not only an outstanding ethnography of a religion of great cultural richness, but also a radically new interpretation of traditional African religions in general: as not merely expressive vehicles of social values, but also theoretical systems for explaining and controlling the phenomenal world. This latter argument was presented in several articles, highly influential throughout anthropology as a whole, which drew on RH's Kalabari ethnography but ranged in their generalizations far beyond it. Chief among these – and perhaps the most widely cited and argued over of all RH's writings – was his great two-part article published in *Africa* 37 (1967a,b), 'African traditional thought and Western science'.⁶

Political interference at the University of Ife 1962-65 had led to his resignation in 1965, and for several years he was attached as a research fellow to the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan 1965-69, supported in part by modest private means. Then, after the University of Ife had moved to its splendid new campus at Ile-Ife itself (1970-78), he joined the staff of its Department of Sociology and Anthropology. There was a short-lived second marriage, again with a Kalabari woman. In 1978, after some prejudiced and

ill-conceived attacks on his work on African thought by a group of Yoruba academics, he left Ife for a professorship in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Port Harcourt in Rivers State 1978-97, much closer to his adopted second home at Buguma. Here RH married again: it was a contented and long-lasting union which produced a daughter, Winnie. His main home and library remained on the University of Port Harcourt campus where he became an honorary research associate from 1997 till after his formal retirement in 2004, after which he relocated to the house he had built for himself and the family of his first wife at Buguma. Here he lives till today [writing in 2007].

The creativity of RH's work in the 1960s was sustained into the 1970s and 1980s, and took several new directions. His article 'African conversion' in *Africa* 41 (1971a), followed by 'On the rationality of conversion' in *Africa* 45 (1975a,b) launched a new paradigm for the study of religious change, and stimulated much application and critique, not just in Africa or only by anthropologists.⁷ There were several articles of historical reconstruction: not just on Kalabari, but also one on the rise and decline of ancient Ife (1976),⁸ and his seminal treatment of a difficult topic, 'Stateless societies in the history of West Africa' in J.F. Ade Ajayi and M. Crowder's standard *History of West Africa* (1971b). There was his long comparative essay on 'Social psychologies: African and Western' that accompanied the reissue of M. Fortes' classic *Oedipus and Job in West African religion*, itself as long as the original (1983a). There were various elaborations and replies to the critics of his earlier work on African thought, which had become a key point of reference in the debate about rationality as a cross-cultural category that was then current in the social sciences. The book he edited with Ruth Finnegan, *Modes of thought* (1973), and his essay 'Tradition and modernity revisited', published in Hollis and Lukes's edited volume, *Rationality and relativism* (1983b) further refined his ideas. Many of his articles on this theme (including his Frazer lecture of 1987) were collected in the volume *Patterns of thought in Africa and the West: Essays on magic, religion and science*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1993.

By the 1990s RH was focusing more on local issues, though he still kept abreast with developments in anthropology, religious studies and the philosophy of science on his annual or twice-yearly visits to the UK, when he did the rounds of his colleagues, scoured the bookshops and returned to Nigeria laden with the latest publications. Based as he was in a mainly religious studies department at Port Harcourt, he was much concerned with maintaining the standards of a calm and objective study of religion – no easy endeavour in a country where religious belief was so strong

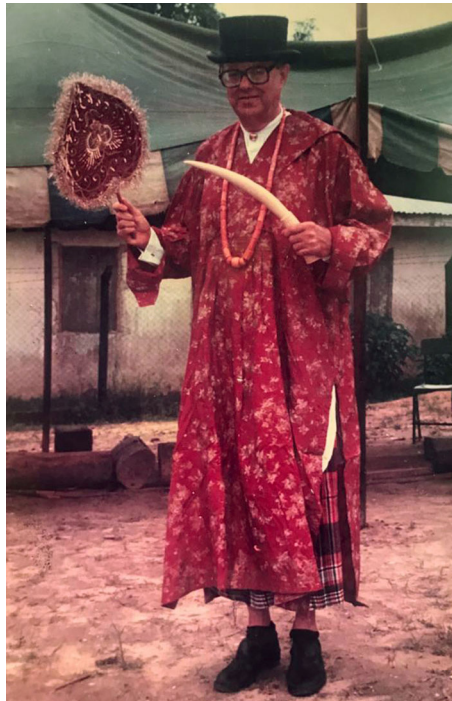
and religious conflict a growing social reality. He worked to distil his introductory lectures, setting out the principles for an empirical study of religion in Nigeria, into a book – the four or five chapters I have seen show his exemplary clarity and grasp of the issues – though it still remains in typescript form. RH has always been a slow and considered writer, lucid and methodical, always eschewing jargon and obscurity, though prone to polemical digs at his opponents!

At a time when Nigerian universities were sinking steadily into decline, through underfunding and mismanagement, indifference and corruption, with worsening facilities and dismal libraries, excessive student-staff ratios and wretched academic salaries, it showed an extraordinary devotion to his chosen field and country that RH stayed in Nigeria, when he might easily have moved to the rich pastures of the United States. He took enormous trouble to bring on and improve the work of his colleagues and students, particularly Master's students who might go on to do research and become the next generation of Nigerian scholars. He supervised their dissertations, corrected their drafts, provided references and introductions for them to the metropolitan centres of academic advancement. Most of this work inevitably dealt with a very local subject matter, and much of it fell outside the strict confines of religious studies. For years, his two closest significant senior colleagues in Nigeria were the historian E.J. Alagoa and the late Kay Williamson, the greatest expert on the complex language patterns of the Niger Delta. RH has a truly synoptic vision of what Niger Delta studies might be, drawing on history (written and oral), ethnography, archaeology, linguistics ...

Social anthropology is about drawing on a detailed knowledge of a particular culture (typically not the anthropologist's own) in order to enhance our understanding of what makes humankind in general what it is. I can think of no other living anthropologist who has combined such a contribution to the discipline at the highest level of theory, with such a deep and long-lasting familiarity with 'his people' as RH has. Anthropological monographs have depended crucially on the fieldworker's relationship with a 'key informant', often a wise elder or acknowledged expert in the lore of the community. RH has worked so long in Buguma, and has got to know it so well over such a long period of time (which has seen such changes), that he *is* now the principle ritual expert in the community, the main repository of the knowledge of its history and culture. Now in his mid-70s, RH has a strong sense of what work remains for him to do, both in terms of the theoretical issues about systems of thought that have always engaged him, and of the detailed analysis of Kalabari religion. My own most fervent hope is that he will complete his empirical and analytical study, so many years in gestation, of Kalabari religion. ●

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18 January 2007



Figs 2 & 3. Robin Horton, the Kalabari elder.

1. The RAI archive lists two unpublished papers of the same period, 'Ijo ritual sculpture', with photographs by Robin Horton and Noah Onwuka (MS 345), and 'Untitled about the Ijo of the Rivers Province' (MS 349), both originally among the papers of William Fagg.
2. According to Murray Last (personal communication), Robin lectured on the anthropology of religion at UCL.
3. To become the celebrated artist Sokari Douglas Camp CBE, <http://sokari.co.uk/>.
4. *The gods as guests: An aspect of Kalabari religious life* was a Special Issue of *Nigeria Magazine* (Volume 3); *Kalabari sculpture*, a publication of the Federal Department of Antiquities of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, presumably accepted during the directorship of Bernard Fagg (1957-63).
5. A bibliography of Horton's publications has been promised for publication in *Africa*. For some of the ethnographic essays from the period 1960-70, many of them named after Kalabari institutions, see Horton (1960b, 1962a, 1963, 1964a, 1965b, 1966, 1967c, 1968, 1969a, 1969b, 1970).
6. The theoretical works stretch from the early 1960s and predominate from the 1970s: Horton (1960c, 1961, 1962b, 1964b, 1967a,b, 1971a, 1973, 1975a,b, 1983a, 1983b, 1984, 1987).
7. John omits to mention here both that Robin's original argument about conversion was largely based on his own then recent monograph on the Yoruba religious movement Aladura (Peel 1968), and that they were later to co-author a defence of the Horton intellectualist thesis (Horton & Peel 1976).
8. I cannot find a reference to Horton (1976), but he did publish two essays on Ife in 1979 and 1992.

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