

Robin W. G. Horton (1932–2019): his life and work

Robin Horton, one of the world's finest intellectuals, one of anthropology's most original, brilliant and influential scholars, and a most provocative philosopher of African indigenous modes of thought in the last fifty years, died on 28 November 2019. He was born an English man, trained at Oxford, lived and died a Kalabari (Niger Delta, Nigeria) gentleman, and was buried in Buguma on 18 January 2020 as a member of royalty by the Kalabari-Ijaw. He came to them as a learner and they took him in as their own. He became an expert in their religion, culture and history, and eventually grew into a wise elder they turned to in order to understand their culture, history and rituals. He also taught the world how to interpret Kalabari religion and to take its philosophical ideas seriously.

Horton – influenced by Tylor and Frazer – studied African religions always in the context of cognitive science and comparative philosophy. His scholarship has proved important and enduring in our understanding of the philosophy of African traditional religions (ATRs). His theory of religious conversion, more than four decades after he crafted it, is still generating enormous scholarly attention.

Horton, who preferred the scholarly essay format to the book format to publish his ideas, was noted for works that were not only brilliant but were also groundbreaking and ground-clearing. His essays were lucid and methodical, as theoretically sophisticated as they were rooted in ethnography, and they proved enormously successful, placing ATRs' philosophy and the Kalabari pattern of thought within a universal narrative of humanity's engagement with reality, God and the quest for explanation.

This philosopher–anthropologist was born in London on 27 October 1932 to William Gray Horton, who was a lieutenant colonel in the Scots Guard, and his wife Gwendolen (née Le Bas). William Gray came to Britain from the United States. Robin's grandfather was the American impressionist painter William Samuel Horton.

Robin Horton obtained a bachelor's degree (first-class honours) in philosophy, psychology and physiology from New College, Oxford in 1956. Before going to Oxford – after completing school at Harrow – he was sent to Nigeria to do his national service. He served in the Royal West Africa Frontier Force (1950–51) in Kaduna. On leaving Oxford he went to University College London for his doctorate in anthropology, which he never completed. He was advised by Professor Daryll Forde, his supervisor, to study the Kalabari and so he returned to Nigeria in 1962 for his research, and he fell in love with a Kalabari woman, Hanna Douglas. This woman died in childbirth in 1964 and he married another Kalabari woman (Ibieneba Abo-Briggs), with whom he had a daughter, Edwina.

Horton focused his anthropological career on the Kalabari and stayed in Nigeria for the rest of his life. His academic career began at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). He transferred to the University of Ibadan in 1965, staying there until 1969. He returned to Ife in 1970 and in 1978 he left it again and moved to the University of Port Harcourt (Niger Delta), where he served until his retirement in 2005 as a professor of philosophy and religion.

Horton's scholarship compelled attention because of two main theses (arising out of his 'intellectualist approach' to religion) that he pursued in various forms throughout his long career. He argued that African traditional religious theory in crucial aspects is more akin to modern natural science than to modern religion, especially Protestant Christianity. According to him, ATRs are engaged in 'explanation, prediction, and control', and this is an orientation that they share with modern natural sciences. His point is that theories in natural sciences and traditional religions are similar in certain relevant aspects. Working from this understanding, he systematically developed an analogy between natural science and ATRs, without actually arguing that traditional religions are sciences.

His articles on conversion refocused and relaunched the study of religious change. Horton argued that religious conversion or change is related to social transformation. More precisely, as a people in micro-worlds encounter and interact with the wider worlds, macrocosms, as their circumstances are transformed, their religious need for explanation, prediction and control changes. This nudges them to convert to a new religion that better explains events in their expanded micro-macro world.

For these and other powerful ideas, which we cannot recount here because of space limitations, Horton was invited to give the prestigious Frazer Lecture in 1987 and he was elected fellow of the British Academy in 1996. His ideas were original, persuasive and provocative. His mastery of sophisticated ideas across multiple fields demonstrated to his readers the weighty benefits of a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge production.

British anthropologist and historian J. D. Y. Peel (1941–2015) offered this assessment of Horton's scholarship:

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 Robin Horton has ... Horton 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.¹

Professor Robin Horton was a proper, genuine, *complete* (*krakra*) Kalabari gentleman. He was a highly respected repository of the lore of the community and embodied the refined virtues and the aristocratic ideals of the Kalabari *Igbo* masquerade, which he brilliantly analysed in his 1966 essay.² He was even a 'diplomat' for the Ijaw ethnic group. In one of our conversations in the 1990s, he told me that, during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70), he lobbied the governments in London and Washington DC on behalf of the Ijaw people, asking them to protect the Ijaw. He shuttled between London and Washington multiple times to inform the global powers about the Ijaw stance during the crisis. In recognition of Horton's contributions to Niger Delta studies and to the Ijaw people, one of his former students, Ambassador Boladei Igali, announced at the funeral ceremony that he would

¹J. D. Y. Peel (2007), 'Unpublished short biography of Robin Horton', p. 5.

²Robin Horton (1966) 'Igbo: an ordeal for aristocrats', *Nigerian Magazine* 90: 168–83.

endow a chair in Ijaw Studies at the University of Port Harcourt in honour of Robin William Gray Horton.

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