

A Problem of Perspective: Religions in Africa or African Traditional Religion

Bakış Açısı Problemi: Afrika'da Dinler veya Geleneksel Afrika Dini

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Abstract

This study critiques study of African religions as a singular phenomenon under the umbrella term "African Traditional Religion" and rejects this reductionist approach, suggesting that a more detailed approach that recognises the diversity and plurality of religions on the African continent would allow for more insightful results in the study of religion in Africa. Along with Islam and Christianity, many religions indigenous to African peoples are still practised in Africa. Information about African religions was first provided in the works written mostly by Westerners. The works written by Christian missionaries, anthropologists, soldiers and researchers on religious life in Africa, both before and after the colonial period, have been the trendsetters of the "religion in Africa" literature. In such studies, Africa was analysed as a totality and the term "African Traditional Religion" was created. Besides, these studies were mostly biased, they often looked at religious phenomena from the perspective of Christianity and tried to Christianise them, and even more importantly, they made generalisations and presented all religions as a single religion. Later works by Africans were mostly written by Africans who converted to Christianity. This has led to the continuation of the reductionist and generalising approach in the relevant literature. Studies conducted from this perspective have typically situated African religions within frameworks that emphasize concepts such as the Supreme Being, spirits, ancestor veneration, magic, and sorcery. By highlighting these shared phenomena and oral traditions, this reductionist and orientalist perspective has contributed to the perception of African religions as a singular, cohesive entity. Even today, this effect can be seen in many works. Just as it is an erroneous approach to consider the peoples of Africa as a single race or nation, it is equally problematic to consider the religions of Africa as a single religion. This approach, which places the understanding that there is a single religion in the whole continent based on some similarities observed among the religions in Africa, has prevented the understanding of religious diversity in Africa and African religions. Although it may seem like a practical and problem-free approach, it is obvious that this perspective hinders the understanding of African religions and hence the understanding of Africa. The articles and books analysed in the context of this study have been instrumental in identifying a number of problems associated with this perspective. Many researchers have used the singular term 'Traditional African Religion' and failed to acknowledge the differences between religions. Others have used the term "African Traditional Religion" in the singular, but have stated that religions in Africa should be considered in the plural. Some other researchers have sometimes used a singular and sometimes a plural expression and stated that these can change according to the context, and that both expressions are correct. A small number of researchers also acknowledged that the appropriate term is "religions in Africa" or "African Traditional Religions" in the plural form, in accordance with the points raised in this study. Therefore, this study argues that the individual characteristics of African religions should not be generalised and represented as a single phenomenon, but that a more accurate understanding of these still living religions, with particular emphasis on their differences, will contribute to the understanding of Africa.

Key Words: History of Religions, African religions, African traditional religion, Orientalism, Colonialism.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Afrika dinlerinin tekil bir olgu olarak "Geleneksel Afrika Dini" şeklindeki bir şemsiye terim altında incelenmesini eleştirmekte ve bu indirgemeci yaklaşımı reddederek Afrika kıtasındaki dinlerin çeşitliliğini ve çoğulluğunu kabul eden bir yaklaşımın Afrika'daki din çalışmalarında daha anlamlı sonuçlar elde edilmesine imkân tanıyacağını önermektedir. Afrika'da İslam ve Hristiyanlığın yanı sıra Afrika halklarına özgü birçok din hâlâ yaygın olarak varlıklarını devam ettirmektedir. Bu dinler hakkındaki bilgilerimiz ilk olarak çoğunlukla Batılılar tarafından kaleme alınan eserlerde yer almıştır. Hem kolonyal dönem öncesinde hem de sonrasında Hristiyan misyonerlerin, antropologların, askerlerin ve araştırmacıların Afrika'daki dini yaşam hakkında yazdıkları eserler, "Afrika'da din" literatürünün yön göstericileri olmuştur. Bu çalışmalarda Afrika bir bütün olarak değerlendirilmiş ve ortaya "Geleneksel Afrika Dini" şeklinde bir terim çıkmıştır. Ayrıca bu çalışmalar çoğunlukla taraflı, olgulara Hristiyanlık perspektifinden bakan ve onları Hristiyanlaştırmaya çalışan, daha da önemlisi, birtakım genellemeler ile tüm dinleri tek bir din gibi gösteren eserlerdir. Daha sonra Afrikalılar tarafından yapılan çalışmalar da çoğunlukla Hristiyanlığa ihtida edenler tarafından yapılmıştır. Bu, ilgili literatürde var olan indirgemeci ve genelleyici eğilimin devam etmesine sebep olmuştur. Bu bakış açısıyla yapılan çalışmalar Afrika dinlerini Yüce Varlık, ruhlar, atalar kültü, sihir ve büyü olguları kısıncında ele almıştır. Bu oryantalist bakış açısı, birtakım ortak olguları ve sözlü geleneği sebep göstererek Afrika dinlerinin tekil bir din olduğu algısını yerleştirmiştir. Bugün dahi birçok çalışmada bu etkinin devam ettiğini görmek mümkündür. Afrika'da yaşayan halkların tek bir ırk veya millet olarak değerlendirilmesi nasıl hatalı bir yaklaşım ise Afrika'da yaşayan dinlerin tek bir din olarak değerlendirilmesi de aynı derecede sorunlu bir yaklaşımdır. Afrika'daki dinlerde gözlemlenen birtakım benzerliklerden hareketle bütün kıtada tek bir din olduğu anlayışını yerleştiren bu yaklaşım, Afrika'daki dini çeşitliliğin ve Afrika dinlerinin anlaşılmasına engel olmuştur. Her ne kadar kolaylaştırıcı ve sorunları ortadan kaldıran bir yaklaşım gibi görünse de bu bakış açısının Afrika dinlerinin ve dolayısıyla Afrika'nın anlaşılmasını engellediği ortadadır. Bu çalışma bağlamında incelenen makale ve kitaplarda bu perspektifin ortaya çıkardığı sorunlara işaret edilmiştir. Birçok araştırmacı Geleneksel Afrika Dini terimini tekil olarak kullanmış ve dinler arasındaki farklılıkları görmezden gelmiştir. Bazıları ise tekil olarak Geleneksel Afrika Dini ifadesini kullanmış ancak Afrika'da dinlerin çoğul olarak değerlendirilmesi gerektiğini belirtmiştir. Diğer bazı araştırmacılar ise bazen tekil, bazen çoğul bir ifade kullanmış ve bunların bağlama göre değişebileceğini, her iki ifadenin de doğru olduğunu belirtmişlerdir. Çok az sayıda araştırmacı bu çalışmada işaret edilen birtakım hususlara da değinerek doğru terimin çoğul olarak "Afrika'da dinler" veya "Geleneksel Afrika Dinleri" olması gerektiğini kabul etmiştir. Bu çalışma, Afrika dinlerinin bireysel özelliklerinin birtakım genellemeler yapılarak tek bir olgu olarak betimlenmesini değil, özellikle bu farklılıklara vurgu yapılarak hala yaşayan bu dinlerin daha doğru bir şekilde anlaşılmasının Afrika'nın anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunacağını ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dinler Tarihi, Afrika dinleri, Geleneksel Afrika dini, Oryantalizm, Kolonyalizm.

Introduction¹

The history of humanity in Africa is very old. It is also claimed that modern man first emerged in Africa, especially in East Africa.² During this very long human history in Africa, the contacts between peoples naturally led to the formation of some basic similarities between their religions. Also, the peoples who separated and moved away from each other over time maintained some common religious practices. These similarities allow us to make generalisations about some common characteristics of African religions.³ These generalisations, however, led to the coining of the term "African Traditional Religion", which does not have an exact equivalent in reality. There is no such phenomenon as African Traditional Religion.

Religions in Africa were initially described by Westerners with terms such as fetishism, idolatry, primitive religion, spiritualism, totemism, witchcraft, polytheism and monotheism, emphasising some common features of religious practices observed in Africa. Researchers presented their studies and observations made among a particular people in a particular region in a way to be inclusive of the entirety of Africa. Sometimes, the descriptions made by primary authors for a particular people were later quoted by later researchers as if they were applicable to a whole continent.⁴

There are many researchers who analyse a particular religious phenomenon with some common characteristics, and then use it in their perception and presentation of all African religions as a single religion. Awolalu, for example, addressing the phenomenon of sin, uses the data provided by some anthropologists or missionaries through studies among a particular people to describe the phenomenon of sin in the whole of Africa. He states that "although sin can be punished by deities or ancestors, we must realise that Africans believe such sins as offences against God, the creator of the universe, who expects his creatures to maintain good relationship with one another and with the supersensible world...".⁵ These statements are a tangible example for the generalisation of the results from observations

¹ This article is created from a paper presented at the "International Africa Symposium" held in Malatya on 25-27 May 2024. Title of the paper: "Afrika'da Dinler veya Afrika Geleneksel Dini".

² Marta Mirazón Lahr - Robert A. Foley, "Human Evolution in Late Quaternary Eastern Africa", *Africa from MIS 6-2: Population Dynamics and Paleoenvironments*, ed. Sacha C. Jones ve Brian A. Stewart (Cambridge: Springer, 2016), 215-231.

³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "African religions", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Erişim 7 Mayıs 2024).

⁴ Newell S. Booth, "Tradition and Community in African Religion", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 9/2 (1978), 81-82.

⁵ J. Omosade Awolalu, "Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44/2 (1976), 287.

among one or a few peoples to a whole continent. Moreover, this "understanding of sin", which is presented as a characteristic of African religions, is a phenomenon that we can easily detect in other religions as well. Arslan⁶ does the same in an article titled "the phenomena of god in African traditional religion". It is not often that such and similar phenomena, which are quite ordinary and natural, are used to categorise other religions under an umbrella term. However, African religions are easily presented as a single religion with such simple inferences, probably because there is not much objection from believers who do not care what some scholars say about their religions.

Lugira posits that "African religion can be expressed both in singular and plural forms." The singular expression, such as "African religion" or "traditional African religion," represents the spiritual unity of the religion, while the plural expression reflects the diverse manifestations of African religion among various African ethnic groups.⁷ This is a partially acceptable claim. However, as we will observe in the following pages, many researchers do not exhibit such sensitivity. Numerous authors, perpetuating a colonial perspective, indiscriminately use the term "African Traditional Religion" to encompass the entire continent without questioning its appropriateness. Some acknowledge the problematic nature of the singular term and critique the Western perspective, yet continue to use the same expression. Others employ it to foster a sense of African identity. Only a few researchers advocate for the use of the plural form or use it without any explanation.

In this study, descriptive and comparative methodologies of history of religion and critical methodology of cultural studies are used. First, an attempt is made to clarify what is meant by the term "African Traditional Religion" in the singular. Subsequently, examples are provided of those who use and advocate for this term, those who have an unclear stance, and those who oppose it. As the study aims to demonstrate that "African religion" in the singular is inherently problematic, necessary objections and criticisms are made in relevant sections. In the conclusion, the objections to and criticisms of this term are presented as a whole.

⁶ Hammet Arslan, "Geleneksel Afrika Dini'nde Tanrı Tasavvuru", *B. Ü. İslami İlimler Fakültesi Dergisi* 2/2 (2015), 7-25.

⁷ Aloysius M. Lugira, *African Traditional Religion* (New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2009), 119-120.

1. What is "African Traditional Religion"?

1.1. Oral Tradition

The term "traditional" in "African Traditional Religion" highlights the traditional nature of African religions, emphasizing their transmission not through written texts but orally and through lived practices from generation to generation.⁸ This is likely the most fundamental common feature of African religions. However, this unwritten tradition in Africa is not exclusive to religions and is not solely a religious phenomenon. The development of an oral tradition instead of a written literature in Africa has also hindered the creation or recording of religious texts. This oral tradition serves as the primary means of transmitting these religions.

It is almost impossible for those studying religion in Africa to refer to any ancient or original religious literature. The absence of religious texts, the multitude of local languages, and their incomprehensibility to researchers led to a superficial understanding of religious phenomena as seen from the outside and their interpretation using foreign terminology. It is often overlooked that early missionaries and anthropologists viewed and assessed these religions from a Christian perspective, employing Christian terminology in their evaluations. This resulted in the erroneous belief that similar phenomena encountered in various case studies conducted among particular peoples represent the same things across all African religions. Christian missionaries observing phenomena that might be inherently different within various communities interpreted these phenomena through the lens of their Christian knowledge and perspective. The similarities in these interpretations have contributed to the misconception that the religions in Africa constitute a single religion.

African religions, transmitted through oral tradition, have not been transcribed into some sacred scriptures by their adherents. In these religions, "rituals" and practices are prioritized over texts and dogmas. To transcribe oral religious tradition into written text is to diminish it, as a religious phenomenon conveyed orally within a gathering loses its vitality and meaning when converted to text. Booth even argues that once encapsulated in textual expressions, these traditions would cease to be "traditional" and become "scriptural," noting that custodians of tradition in Rwanda, for example, resist this transition for this reason.⁹ For these and other reasons, African religions lack any religious texts. Initially, Christian

⁸ Booth, "Tradition and Community in African Religion", 81-82.

⁹ Booth, "Tradition and Community in African Religion", 85-86.

missionaries sought to eradicate these religions.¹⁰ For them, Africans were 'living in darkness' and the missionaries had come to bring the light of Christ to the African 'pagans'.¹¹

However, it is nearly impossible¹² to eradicate a living tradition. Consequently, Europeans, failing to eliminate these religions, decided to define them using terms alien to these traditions—specifically, Christian terminology. Westerners attempted to describe African religions through Christian concepts such as sacred scriptures, special days of worship, the Trinity, resurrection, and eschatology.¹³ When African religions did not conform to these criteria, they refrained from defining them as religions, instead described them with terms such as "rituals," "beliefs," and "witchcraft." Since they could not see a distinct and systematic structure as Christianity, they began to refer to all of these phenomena as a single entity, "African Traditional Religion". Thus, Africa, composed of not peoples but various tribes and their religious practices, was construed as having a single, albeit diverse, religion spread across the continent. This singular term gained widespread acceptance, and many African researchers adopted and continue to use it.

1.2. Supreme Being or High God

Idowu criticizes those who, upon finally recognizing African religions as legitimate, invented a repulsive title like 'high god' to describe the deity in these religions. He also criticizes those who study the phenomenon of religion in Africa by reading travellers' journals at their desks, emphasizing the necessity of fieldwork for such studies. However, despite writing a book on Yoruba religion, Idowu later used the term "African Traditional Religion" in the title of another work. He argues that this singular term, despite all objections, is accurate because Africa's culture and religious beliefs share a common Africanness due to the diffusion or common origins in race, traditions, and practices. Certain elements are common across neighbouring regions and even distant areas. The concept of God, especially the characteristics of God, is similar across the continent. For example, the name of God, Yamba, appears in various forms in different regions. In Kulung, Piya, and Nigeria's Pero, Tangale, and Waja areas, it is Yamba; in Cameroon and Congo, it appears as

¹⁰ Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 112.

¹¹ Frans Wijzen, "Mission Practice and Theory in Africa", *The Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (New York: Routledge, 2016), 190.

¹² The complete disappearance of a religion is not impossible. For instance, indigenous religions in northern Africa, such as those of ancient Egypt, Berber, Cushite, and Aksumite traditions in northern, southern, and southeastern Ethiopia, have become extinct over time. Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 120.

¹³ Nokuzola Mndende, "From Underground Praxis to Recognized Religion: Challenges Facing African Religions", *Journal for the Study of Religion* 11/2 (1998), 117.

Yambe or Yembe. The Akan name for God, Onyame or Nyame, is another variation of the same name.¹⁴

Idowu's objections and criticisms, made from an overarching African identity and rejecting Western approaches and definitions, are indeed valid. However, it is interesting that he ultimately attempts to categorize all of Africa and its peoples' religions under a singular umbrella term due to some natural similarities. Following a pattern used by many researchers, Idowu defines the fundamental elements of traditional African religion as the belief in a Supreme God, lesser deities, spirits, ancestor veneration, and practices of magic and healing.¹⁵ This is, in fact, another way of taking the easy route. On one hand, Idowu advocates for studying African religions through fieldwork and truly understanding the lived religious phenomena. On the other hand, he tries to define all African religions under a single term, disregarding all the differences and unique characteristics. This approach merely presents African religions as a collage. In attempting to avoid one mistake, Idowu opens the door to another. Many researchers have adopted and continue to perpetuate this error.

Pobee suggests that the elements of African religions, which lack written texts, can be defined through phenomenological studies of liturgy used in religious rituals and ceremonies, prayers, dances and songs, art, proverbs, and myths. Using these sources, he summarizes the fundamental components of traditional African religions, specifically within the Akan religion, as "belief in a Supreme Being, respect for or cult of ancestors, belief in spirits or lesser deities, magic, witchcraft, and rites of passage."¹⁶ These elements indeed appear in the religions of other African peoples as well. However, for instance, the deistic Supreme God, often defined as a creator, is not distant or uninterested in the world and humanity in the Akan religion. Ordinary people, not just clergy, can regularly and daily offer prayers to the Supreme God.¹⁷ This involvement of the Supreme God in daily life is a distinctive feature that may vary from other interpretations of a theistic creator deity in different African religions.

In many African religions, the creator god is one. This is why African religions are sometimes said to be monotheistic. However, in addition to this one god, there are also a number of other lesser gods or spirits. Therefore, African religions are described as having

¹⁴ E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 92-104.

¹⁵ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 140-203.

¹⁶ John Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion", *Sociological Analysis* 37/1 (1976), 4-18.

¹⁷ Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion", 4.

both monotheistic and polytheistic characteristics at the same time. Idowu proposes the term "diffused or illicit monotheism" to express this phenomenon of deity in African religions.¹⁸ The supreme being is often described as the creator god, but he does not have the same characteristics in all African religions. For example, the Fon people of Benin believe that the creator god, whom they call Nana-Bulukú, has a dual nature, male and female. Bemba, the god of the Bambaras of West Africa, is a god with four attributes. Each attribute is the lord of a different element: air, fire, water and earth.¹⁹

The term "Supreme Being" or "Supreme God" used by researchers of African religions in reference to the creator god is problematic in itself. For God is called by different names in the languages of different peoples. He is called Enkai by the Masais in Kenya and Tanzania, Amma by the Dogon in Mali, Nyame by the Asantes in Ghana, Olorun (or Olodumare) by the Yoruba in Nigeria.²⁰ The Zulus call the creator god Unkulunkulu, the Shonas Mwari, the Mendes Leve.²¹ As noted above, this creator god, who sometimes has different characteristics among different peoples, has been referred to by a general term that strips him of his name and identity. The use of this term categorised gods with different characteristics, and thus religions, into a categorical definition and supported the perspective of "African Traditional Religion". It has also supported the discourse that certain spiritual beings are subordinate gods. So much so that ancestral spirits have also been deified.

Ronald M. Green, who argues that "African Traditional Religion" has a rational basis, as Immanuel Kant asserted, and shows a fundamental conformity to the universal moral and religious 'deep structure', describes African religious life as a structure that includes "spirit mediumship, witchcraft and ancestor cults". Speaking of African peoples, the author states that there are about 2000 tribal groups. In some of these groups, such as the Lugbara and Azande, the "Supreme Being" is good. In other groups, the Supreme Being may be evil. In both cases, however, they do not directly influence people's lives or intervene in the affairs of the world.²² This is a good example of a reading of Africa from a stereotypical colonial perspective. Africans can only be *tribes*, and their entire religious life consists of a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation and can be considered as a single

¹⁸ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 135-136.

¹⁹ Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 38-39.

²⁰ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "African religions".

²¹ Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 43-45.

²² Ronald M. Green, "Religion and Morality in the African Traditional Setting", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 14/1 (1983), 1-3.

entity. Although the author sometimes refers to the religions of these *tribal groups* as "African Traditional Religions" in the plural and states that the "Supreme Beings" they have might be different from one another, he sees no harm in describing and evaluating African religions as a single "African Traditional Religion" throughout his work.

There are some who note that in translations of the Bible into different African indigenous languages, the word "god" is translated as masculine in some and feminine in others, and see this as a problem.²³ This means that the supreme god, who is thought to be equivalent to the god of the Bible and who is a prominent feature common to African religion, is feminine among some peoples and masculine among others. So how is it possible to assert that African religions have a common conception of the supreme God? The conceptualisation of African Traditional Religion on the basis of this shared "Supreme God", which has no correspondence in reality, is problematic.

1.3. Ancestors

Venerating ancestor spirits and seeking their help is yet another common theme that many scholars of African religions have pointed out.²⁴ The Akan people, for example, believe that ancestors care for them and engage in worldly affairs. Prayers to the ancestors usually invoke long life and health, God's grace, communal peace, fertility, strength of sight and hearing, rainfall, and the general welfare of the people. The welfare of the living depends on the ancestors. Ancestors are the second fundamental element in Akan religion after the supreme god.²⁵ Among the Yoruba, however, in the hierarchy of superhuman beings, ancestors come second after the supreme being Olodumare and other gods and goddesses. The spirits of the dead, including ancestors and the ordinary dead, are respected and venerated. They are considered superhuman and are accorded the status of immortality. The living are expected to honour the dead through rituals as their souls leave the body and become spirits.²⁶

In Akan and Yoruba religions, the intermediary function of ancestors between the Supreme God and humans is similar, but the hierarchy is different. However, the difference is not a simple matter of hierarchy. The god or hierarchy of gods in a religion is one of the fundamental dogmas of that religion. It is problematic to consider two religions with

²³ Elias Kifon Bongmba (ed), *The Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 6-7.

²⁴ Mark Hanna Watkins, "African Traditional Religion by Geoffrey Parrinder", *The Journal of Negro History* 39/4 (1954), 315-317; Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 16.

²⁵ Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion", 8-9.

²⁶ Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 50.

different hierarchies of gods as the same phenomenon based on some external similarities. In African religions, there are a number of beliefs ranging from ancestor veneration to ancestor worship. However, each religion has its own distinctive characteristics. Even such an unsuspecting statement as "ancestors are important in African Traditional Religion" leads to many details being lost or relegated to the background.

1.4. Other Gods and Spirits

Along with the supreme god and ancestors, African religions have spirits or gods that dwell or move in certain specific places, such as rivers, hills and trees. These may be gods specific to a particular region or village/town, patron gods of certain professions, or gods who are invoked for a special purpose, such as fertility. These gods, who are responsible for ruling the world and providing support to people in times of trouble, are local gods associated with particular regions and form the pantheon of gods of the people of that region. The pantheons of different African religions vary according to their needs and character. These lower-level deities are also referred to as "children of God", as they are believed to have been sent by the Supreme God to benefit humanity.²⁷

Lugira states that in African religion the supreme being reigns in heaven as the chief deity, but in most traditions, he does not interfere in the daily affairs of people, leaving this task to the lesser gods who live in the spirit world. The spirit world consists of supernatural beings, spiritual guardians and ancestor spirits who live in the spiritual universe between gods and humans. Spiritual guardians and ancestors are the protectors and defenders of mankind, spiritually stationed between supernatural beings and humans. A nearby mountain, the spirit of a river or an extraordinarily large tree, or an animal can be identified as the protector of a particular region.²⁸

Lesser gods and spirits, which are presented as one of the basic constituents of traditional African religion, are indeed a common presence in many African religions. However, their number, functions and cults vary from region to region and people to people. As already pointed out, in some African religions the ancestors are even more important than these lesser gods. Despite these differences observed among the gods who are the subjects of religious rituals, it is problematic to interpret them as expressing the same phenomenon based only on the fact that they "exist" in African religions.

²⁷ Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion", 10-11; Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 53.

²⁸ Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 46-47.

2. Proponents of African Traditional Religion and Their Thoughts

An article from 1919 entitled "The Basis of African Religion" is one of the first examples of the colonial perspective. The author of the article, Frederick H. G. Migeod, spent the years 1900-1931 working in the colonial administration in Africa and authored many works during this period. In his article, he acknowledges that African religion is difficult to understand and states that the first reason for this is that Africans do not want to impart such information to white Europeans. He notes that Europeans first labelled the religion of Africans, whom they observed to respect certain objects, as "idolatry", then as "fetishism", and in time, realising that it was not the objects but the spirits that resided in them that were important, they started to define it as "animism", and he accepts that these are definitions that prevent the understanding of African religion. Migeod, instead proposes the term "spiritualism" and argues that the precarious nature of Africa imposes spiritualism on people.²⁹

Migeod argues that each tribe has a form of priesthood that is in charge of the spirits. In the case of the ancestor cult, however, the tribal chief, who has no religious office, takes part in the relevant rituals. There are both communal rituals and individual rituals. In these individual rituals, even actions bordering on "witchcraft" are performed. Recognising that there are local and national differences in religious ceremonies, he states that the spiritism observed across Africa reveals the homogeneity of African religion.³⁰ Migeod collates a number of religious-spiritual activities that he observed but had not fully understood as "African Religion".

Migeod notes the differences among the different peoples (he uses the term tribe), stating that the Mende people recognise a supreme sky god as well as spirits, whereas the Ashanti worship spirits and ancestors. The supreme god has little influence and is rarely invoked. Migeod likens the spirits, their functions and their relationships with each other to the gods of Ancient Greece. In the Western Ashanti, for example, Obo is the daughter of the River Tano. Prominent natural features such as rivers are the abode of these spirits. The most powerful spirits dwell on high hills and cliffs. Some peoples distinguish between good and evil spirits, but no such distinction is evident among the Mende people.³¹

²⁹ Frederick W. H. Migeod, "The Basis of African Religion", *Journal of the Royal African Society* 19/73 (1919), 20-25.

³⁰ Migeod, "The Basis of African Religion", 25-26.

³¹ Migeod, "The Basis of African Religion", 27-29.

Migeod states that in West Africa "there is probably a belief in a "Supreme God" among all peoples" and that this god is not described in as much detail as the lesser gods. His name is mostly associated with the sky. Unlike the local gods, there is no cult or clerical system associated with him. He asserts that it is debatable whether this idea of a "supreme god" is indigenous to Africa or whether it is a phenomenon developed through the influence of Christianity or Islam. However, even the role of this "Supreme God", which is recognised to exist among all the peoples, is different. For example, the Mende people invoke the name of the Supreme God Ngewo when swearing an oath, believing that life and death are in his hands. However, the Twi speaking Nyankupon people do not involve the Supreme God Nyami in everyday life, except in special cases that exceed the power of local gods.³²

According to Migeod's inferences, which we understand to be based on hearsay rather than personal observations, another important basis of belief in African religion is related to the afterlife. Believing that life continues after death, Africans dress the dead in new clothes. The wives of important people, such as chiefs, are killed and buried with the chiefs so that they continue to accompany them in the afterlife. During the funeral ceremony, sacrifices are offered; in the past, human sacrifices were offered, but now some animals such as sheep can be offered as sacrifices. Migeod states that there are those who say that the blood of the animal replaces the blood of the human being. However, according to him, the authenticity of this substitution is doubtful. For he himself did not witness such an event. However, he states that if a sudden death occurred after the death of an important person, he witnessed that this death was considered as a sacrifice for the previously deceased chief. However, since the place and time of the funerals of important chiefs were hidden from Europeans, it is not known exactly what kind of ceremony was performed.³³ The belief in the afterlife, which Migeod tries to prove without any specific details, is presented by many authors as one of the basic elements of African Religion.

Parrinder, who spent many years in Africa as a methodist missionary is a more recent scholar of African religions who had an important role in cementing the singular term. He writes about the plurality of religions only to denote Islam, Christianity or other foreign religions on the continent.³⁴

³² Migeod, "The Basis of African Religion", 33.

³³ Migeod, "The Basis of African Religion", 35.

³⁴ Edward Geoffrey Parrinder, *Religion in Africa* (New York: Preager Publishers, 1969), 228-232.

A. B. Ellis, frequently cited by Migeod, was a British soldier and ethnographer who also spent many years in Africa. He argues that for the African, morality has nothing to do with religion. Migeod also argues that African religion does not inoculate any charitable behaviour. According to him, "a negro will never do anything for another unless there is an expectation of an equivalent or greater reward."³⁵ These remarks by someone with more than thirty years of experience in Africa are quite interesting. Portraying the African as a different being deprived of the most basic human values, these statements also reveal the author's perspective. Ellis and Migeod may not be recognised as very important figures in African studies today. However, their reductionist and generalising perspective, which saw Africa as a collection of tribes and summarised the religions of African peoples as an underdeveloped traditional belief system despite all their diversity, has profoundly influenced the study of "religion in Africa". The influence of this perspective is more pronounced among African converts. John S. Mbiti is a good example. Mbiti, who had previously adopted the term "African Religions" and used this plural title in one of his books,³⁶ later changed his mind.

John S. Mbiti, a Kenyan convert to Christianity, states that there are three major religions in Africa: Islam, Christianity and African Religion. He contends that African Religion prepares Africans for Christianity,³⁷ a view in which he is not alone. Many Europeans either do not accept the existence of African religions or consider them as a phenomenon preparing Africans for evangelisation.³⁸ Mbiti, who defines African religions as a single entity, is one of the pioneers of "Africa and Religion" studies. His influence has been significant as many researchers perceive and present African religions as a single religion. This is because he came from Africa and conveyed the religious experiences of Africans. However, the fact that he converted to Christianity and even became a priest demands that what he conveys should be treated with scepticism. His argument that the whole of Africa is subject to a single religion is an important issue that should be evaluated in this respect. In the end, the African Religion he defines is a religion that prepares Africans for Christianity.

Mbiti also states that African peoples were subjected to European colonial rule and forced to forget their heritage for a long period, but this situation is no longer the case. To

³⁵ Migeod, "The Basis of African Religion", 37.

³⁶ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970).

³⁷ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 30.

³⁸ Mndende, "From Underground Praxis to Recognized Religion: Challenges facing African Religions", 117.

him, Africa is now rediscovering the richness of its heritage.³⁹ However, it is doubtful how much of a heritage transmitted through oral tradition this rediscovery can adequately reveal. More importantly, in this process of rediscovery, it is highly doubtful to what extent descriptions made in Western and especially Christian terms and definitions in the context of religion can do justice to African Religions. Indeed, Mbiti himself is a convert to Christianity and is one of those who consider African religions as a single phenomenon.

Mbiti states that although African culture has a rich diversity, it can be defined in singular terms as "African culture". In support of his view, he cites the fact that livestock farming is practised in many parts of Africa, that certain crops such as bananas are grown, the circular architecture of houses, the polygamy of men, the role of music in the lives of Africans, and the fact that art often carries religious sentiments⁴⁰ and meanings as evidence.⁴¹ However, this is an extremely superficial argument. Considering the fact that Africa is the continent where humanity spread all over the world and that the communities living here have been in interaction and communication with each other for a much longer period of time compared to other lands, the claim that only the conditions imposed by climate and geography cause the similarities mentioned by Mbiti is a weak argument. Moreover, these similarities, whatever significance they might have, are certainly not sufficient to speak of a unified "African culture" as he claims.

Mbiti, claiming there is a common "African culture" based on the similarities in cultural and social life, also reflects this inference to religion and argues that similarities in religion prove that there is a single "African religion". According to him, African religious beliefs are about God, spirits, human life, magic, the afterlife and the like. But in what religion are these not related to religion? He states that African religion includes festivals and ceremonies for events such as harvest, marriage, rainy season, birth and victory. Are not similar practices relevant for all religions? He argues that people regard certain objects and places as sacred. Are there not holy places in all religions? He states that religious values determine moral rules and there are religious functionaries.⁴² All of these can only be elements of a general definition of religion. It does not follow, as he claims, that African religions are a single religious tradition.

³⁹ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 6.

⁴⁰ Parrinder agrees with Mbiti. Edward Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology*, (Feltham: Newnes, 1982), 8.

⁴¹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 7-8.

⁴² Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 10-11.

J. Omosade Awolalu is yet another author who addresses the phenomenon of religion in Africa as a single religion. Describing "African Traditional Religion" as the "indigenous religion" of Africans, Awolalu states that this religion is transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition (myths, stories, songs, dances, proverbs) and has no written texts and no historical founder. In this religion, it is believed that the "Supreme Being" is the source of all things, that he intervenes in the world through a number of intermediary gods and spirits, that death is not the end, that the spirits of ancestors continue to live and intervene in the world through gods and goddesses and other spiritual beings, and that people are rewarded according to their behaviour.⁴³ However, such phenomena can certainly be claimed to exist in one way or another in many religions. What distinguishes one religion from another may sometimes lie in the details of the experience of these phenomena.

Mbiti acknowledges that religion in Africa manifests in diverse forms across different *tribes*. Religion in Africa is not a phenomenon that is preached or imposed from without; rather, it is an integral aspect of the social fabric of a given people. Consequently, an individual from a different *tribe* cannot simply assume the religious practices of the community into which they have entered.⁴⁴ Despite acknowledging the absence of transitions between the religions of *tribes* and communities, Mbiti is nonetheless inclined to categorise all African belief systems as a single religious tradition. This is a reductionist approach that is in line with the legacy of colonisers and missionaries.

It is a common misconception that individuals who convert to Christianity or Islam in Africa abandon their traditional religion entirely. In fact, they often retain elements of their traditional beliefs alongside their newfound faith. Such beliefs are retained by the individuals in question for several generations, and in some cases, for centuries. This is because religion provides a sense of security and meaning for them.⁴⁵ This Durkheimian definition of "functional religion" is another pillar of Mbiti's attempt to define African religions under a single roof. If this definition is accepted, it can be argued that no matter how many religious differences between the peoples, this is not related to the essence of religion, but rather due to the subjective character of that community. Nevertheless, all religions serve to provide meaning to the world, life, and death for their adherents.

⁴³ Awolalu, "Sin and Its Removal in African Traditional Religion", 275.

⁴⁴ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 13.

⁴⁵ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 13.

Mbiti argues that Africans who convert to Islam and Christianity blend their traditional religion with the religion they convert to, and thus do not lose their traditional values, but rather feel that they have obtained something from both religious systems.⁴⁶ This implies that African religions are in fact an obscure system capable of accommodating all kinds of novelties and divergences. However, this is quite common in all conversions. One cannot deny that many pagan traditions persist within Christianity even today. Africans who converted to Christianity also retained elements of their own religion. This is frequently observed and reflected in studies, especially among Africans who migrated to America. For example, Shango-Baptist groups on the island of Grenada, located in the north of Venezuela in South America, still maintain some Shango rituals and believe in spiritual beings specific to African religions. In the rituals of African religions, elements such as the Christian cross can be found. In a Baptist group in Grenada, both Christ and the gods or holy beings of the Yoruba religion, Egun (Ogun) and Mamadjo, may be venerated.⁴⁷

In contrast to Islam and Christianity, Mbiti claims that African religion does not have a founder.⁴⁸ the African religion evolved over time, changed with new ideas, and took different forms in different locations. It also does not have any scriptures. It is embedded in the proverbs passed down from generation to generation and in the social experiences of the society.⁴⁹ However, since there is no data available, we cannot claim that religions in Africa have no founding fathers. It is quite possible that gods or divine beings, who are called by different names among different peoples, may very well be the founding fathers of these religions. In Africa, where an oral tradition prevails, it is rare to find not only religious, but also literary or social-economic texts or even books in which myths have been compiled. This is partly a natural consequence of the oral tradition, but it does not mean that African religions do not have some principles, stories and founders. Therefore, it is a reductionist, orientalist approach to analyse African religions under a single umbrella term.

The authors of an Encyclopaedia of African Religion criticise Mbiti as well. According to them, Mbiti has further complicated the discourse on African religion by using the plural in his book "African Religions and Philosophy". They argue that the title of Mbiti's book reveals his indecisiveness. "African religions" in the title is problematic, but "African

⁴⁶ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 13.

⁴⁷ Patrick Polk, "African Religion and Christianity in Grenada", *Caribbean Quarterly: The Sprititual Baptist, Shango, and Others: African Derived Religions in the Carribbean* 3/4 (1993), 74-77.

⁴⁸ Mbiti bu düşünceinde yalnız değildir. Bkz. Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 15.

⁴⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 14-15; Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 16.

philosophy" is not. While one is an insistence on plurality, the other is an expression of unity. This is why the authors of the *Encyclopaedia of African Religion* state that they want to emphasise the unity of African religion. They assert that the diversity in African religion is also found in other religions such as Christianity and Islam.⁵⁰ The emergence of different sects and churches in Islam and Christianity has probably also occurred in African religions. However, this does not mean that all African religions are characterised by such sectarianisation and schisms. It is a more problematic discourse to try to explain African religions as a single religion, with their different understandings of God, different religious practices and many other divergences, or with their distinctive features over time. Presenting this non-existent unity as a real phenomenon in academic literature does not make it easier to understand Africa, on the contrary, it makes it more complicated. It tends to ignore and trivialise many details. It is surprising that such a discourse is adopted, especially in an encyclopaedic work.

Lugira is another author who treats African religions as a single religion. In his work "African Traditional Religion", he devotes separate chapters to oral tradition, belief in a supreme being and a spirit world, a series of rites, rituals, sacred places and times, and mystical powers. Noting that many people continue to live "traditional lives" alongside Islam and Christianity, Lugira initially refers to African religion as a "tradition" rather than a religion. This is actually an important part of the problem. While religious traditions elsewhere are recognised by outsiders as separate religions, within Africa all religious beliefs are presented as a single religious tradition with a holistic view, even though their differences may outweigh their similarities. Lugira presents a table showing the proportion of African religion practised in some countries. However, we then come across a table in which he lists the 'religions' of Africa according to ethnic groups.⁵¹ This clearly shows that seeing African religions as a single religion is also a problem for those who want to understand and explain them.

Lugira acknowledges that African religion is not one, but many. He even says that there are "as many African religions as there are African peoples". However, he believes that despite their differences, African religions have some common elements. They all have rites of passage, they all offer meaning and a direction for life and help people to cope with

⁵⁰ Molefi Kete Asante - Ama Mazama (ed), *Encyclopedia of African Religion* (California: Sage Publication, 2009), xxii.

⁵¹ Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 10-11.

suffering. Some of these common elements in African religions are also found in other world religions. However, he insists that despite the diversity of African religions and their common elements with other world religions, the religions of Africa should be seen as a single religion. This is because "belief in the Supreme Being, belief in superhuman beings and respect for ancestors" are the basic and common elements of these religions.⁵² The phenomena that Lugira identifies as common in African religions are also found in many other religions. So, should we not then consider all the world's religious traditions as "one religion"? It is interesting that Lugira, notwithstanding some of his correct observations, insists that African religion is a single entity.

Gibreel M. Kamara, who criticises the view that African peoples did not have any "god" phenomenon before the colonial period and that this phenomenon is seen as the exaltation of a chief or an ancestor to the position of "god" with Christian colonial influence, also adopts the colonial perspective of "African Traditional Religion". According to him, the principles of "god, ancestors and a never-ending world" form the basis of African Traditional Religion. Kamara argues that "African aesthetics and essence can be regained through African Traditional Religion" and presents African "literature", like religion, as a singular phenomenon and states that it is inspired by African belief systems.⁵³ Despite writing with the aims of creating a holistic African consciousness and encouraging an African identity, Kamara continues to see and show Africa from a Western perspective. Like him, many other scholars⁵⁴ of African origin see Africa from this preconceived perspective. The main reason for this, according to Idowu, is that, African researchers begin their studies with an academic temperament dictated by the attitudes and terminologies of foreign authors. Africa, however, "must recover her soul; she must give the first and supreme position to her own God-given heritage, and be obedient to the teachings of her own God appointed prophets."⁵⁵

3. The Confused

The "Journal of Religion in Africa", a scholarly periodical dedicated to the study of religion in Africa since 1967, stands out among the confused in its contribution to the discourse on African religious traditions. The Journal is "interested in all religious traditions

⁵² Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 25.

⁵³ Gibreel M. Kamara, "Regaining Our African Aesthetics and Essence Through Our African Traditional Religion", *Journal of Black Studies* 30/4 (2000), 502-508.

⁵⁴ See also M. Y. Nabofa, "Blood Symbolism in African Religion", *Religious Studies* 21/3 (1985), 389-405.

⁵⁵ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 204-207.

and all their forms, in every part of Africa” and presents “a unique forum for the debate of theoretical issues in the analysis of African religion past and present.”⁵⁶ According to these statements from the journal's introduction page, the religions in Africa are best understood as "religious traditions" in the plural form. This conceptualization is both reasonable and academically sound. However, the subsequent reference to "African religion" appears to contradict this pluralistic view, suggesting that the previous plurality should be interpreted merely as "traditions." This implies the existence of a singular religion in Africa, which manifests through various traditions among different “tribes”.

Booth, who employs both the terms "African religion" and "African religions," provides a nuanced explanation for this dual usage. He argues that the religious beliefs and practices found in Africa are specific to particular communities such as the Baluba, Rwanda, or Igbo. In this context, one could assert that the number of religions in Africa corresponds to the number of these distinct communities. Booth deliberately chooses the term "community" over the more contentious "tribe," aiming for a more neutral expression. However, this terminology also fails to fully acknowledge African peoples as cohesive, collective entities. In these communities, he argues, religious practice is intrinsically centred around the community itself as the ultimate concern. This characteristic seems to be a defining feature of all religions in sub-Saharan Africa, thereby suggesting a conceptual unity under the singular term "African religion."⁵⁷ Despite occasionally using the term "African religions," Booth predominantly employs the singular "African religion" throughout his work, using it at least fifteen times, including in the title of his article. Like many other scholars, Booth focuses on the traditional nature of African religions, highlighting this shared characteristic. Consequently, he presents African religions as a single, unified phenomenon.

Evan M. Zuesse, in his examination of prophecy and deity concepts in African religions, asserts that prophecy is a phenomenon present in all African *cults* and is generally associated with the “Supreme Being.”⁵⁸ Despite referencing the traditions of various peoples sometimes as "cults" and other times as "religions," using the term "African Religions" in the title, and explicitly noting the existence of diverse prophetic practices, it is evident that the author's conceptualization of religion in Africa lacks clarity. He does not emphasize the

⁵⁶ Brill, “Journal of Religion in Africa” (Erişim 15.04.2024).

⁵⁷ Booth, “Tradition and Community in African Religion”, 90.

⁵⁸ Evan M. Zuesse, “Divination and Deity in African Religions”, *History of Religions* 15/2 (1975), 158-182.

distinctiveness of the religions in Africa, and except the article's title, he never uses the plural form "African religions" in his study.

Ben Knighton, in his analysis of the concept of "God" within the context of the Karamoja people of Uganda, notes that the Karamojong have intermixed with the Nilotic peoples and adopted their language. However, he observes that the monotheistic system of the Karamoja people is quite foreign to the Nilotic *tribes*, who primarily believe in spirits and divine beings. Knighton underscores the significant differences in the concept of God, even between two closely related communities. Furthermore, he asserts that African Traditional Religion is particularly inaccessible to the youth, women, and especially outsiders.⁵⁹ Knighton frequently abbreviates "African Traditional Religion" as "ATR" and fails to acknowledge the distinctiveness of the religions of the various groups he examines, referring to them merely as *clans* or *tribes*. This might be an intentional effort to perpetuate colonial frameworks or a result of habitual adherence to established paradigms. In either scenario, the outcome is a misrepresentation of the continent, portraying it as comprising "tribes" rather than peoples, and "belief systems" rather than distinct religions.

4. Those Who Understand Religion in Africa in the Plural

In his study of the elements of traditional African religion, particularly among the Akan of southern Ghana, Pobee emphasises the pluralism of Africanness and the ethnocentric tendencies of religion in Africa. He acknowledges that while there are certain parallel phenomena among the religions of different ethnic groups, it is more accurate to speak of African religions in the plural. However, given the external influences on Africa, Pobee notes that the term 'African Traditional Religion' is generally understood to encompass the religious beliefs and practices of African peoples.⁶⁰ Although Pobee made this clear in his 1976 work, it is clear from earlier examples in this study that many do not understand the term 'Traditional African Religion' in this way. The subtle nuance in Pobee's definition is often overlooked. With an awareness of African identity, Pobee often uses the term 'homo africanus' and prefers 'African peoples' to the terms 'tribe, community and clan' used by many researchers. Nevertheless, he continues to use the terms 'clan' and 'tribe'.

⁵⁹ Ben Knighton, "The Meaning of God in an African Traditional Religion and the Meaninglessness of Well-meaning Mission: The Experience of Christian Enculturation in Karamoja, Uganda", *Transformation* 16/4 (1999), 120.121.

⁶⁰ Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 1.

Ezra Chitando, one of the rare authors who uses the term "African Traditional Religions," notes that early studies on religion in Africa were primarily conducted by Western missionaries, soldiers, and imperialists, often characterized by bias and exaggeration. However, this should not be interpreted as rendering European studies invalid. Many missionary authors who wrote about African religions lived among Africans for many years, gaining close insights and thus providing valuable information. Chitando also observes that most studies by Africans are conducted by individuals who converted to Christianity and view African religions through a Christian lens, leading to criticisms that they "Christianize" African Traditional Religions. He advocates for the phenomenological method as a suitable approach for studying African Traditional Religions, as it can help avoid some reductionist definitions.⁶¹

Marcia Wright, who emphasizes the plurality of religions in Africa, attributes this to the fact that different communities have distinct beliefs and rituals. She also highlights that individuals participating in various ritual environments often possess multiple layers of belief simultaneously.⁶² This suggests that traditional religious rituals, despite their similarities, can hold different meanings for different people. Therefore, it is incorrect to adopt a reductionist view that interprets these apparent similarities as a single "tradition" applicable to all African religions across the continent.

In his article examining the intersection of colonialism, enslavement, liberation struggles, and religion in Africa's global experience, Michael A. Gomez defines African religions as "locally designed religion or organized spirituality." In this local design, death is not an end; individuals either return to the world through reincarnation or join the spirits of their ancestors. Supreme gods and higher deities are distant and detached from human affairs, which is why rituals and supplications are directed towards lower-ranking gods, who govern specific phenomena such as rain, disease, fertility, and rivers. According to Gomez, this religious design was prevalent, to varying degrees, across the African continent, extending back to Pharaonic Egypt. Despite these generalizations and similarities in religions, Gomez emphasizes that African religions are community-specific. Although

⁶¹ Ezra Chitando, "Phenomenology of Religion and the Study of African Traditional Religions", *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 17/4 (2005), 300-303.

⁶² Marcia Wright, "African History in the 1960's: Religion", *African Studies Review* 14/ 3 (1971), 440.

neighbouring communities might influence each other's religions, it is not possible for one community to worship the gods of another.⁶³

Mndende, who refers to African religions in the plural in the title of his article, states that during the colonial period, Africans had to present a baptismal certificate showing their conversion to Christianity and take a European name in order to enter colonial institutions such as schools and hospitals run by whites. However, Africans who practised their own religion at home were permitted to live it as an element of "culture" rather than as a religion. Many Africans practised Christianity during the day and continued to attend their own religious services at night. This led to the undergroundisation of religious practice in Africa. The repressive practices of the Christian colonisers also prevented African religions from being recognised as religions.⁶⁴ Mndende's observation is also evident in the studies encountered in the academic literature. Even in Mndende's article, which laments the lack of recognition accorded to African religions, the term "African Traditional Religion" is often used in the singular, with the abbreviation "ATR".

Mndende, although employing both the singular and the plural term for African religions, presents valid claims against the entrenched Western understanding. According to him, African Christians have attempted to define "African theology" within the context of Christianity, thereby Christianizing it. Others have emphasized the African roots of Christianity, seeking to Africanize Christianity and define the theology of "African Traditional Religion" using Christian theological terms. In both instances, Mndende argues that these efforts have led to a distortion of the African conception of the divine, perpetuated by colonial influences that have demeaned indigenous beliefs and practices. Moreover, Mndende underscores the unfortunate belief among some African theologians that theology is primarily synonymous with Christianity, thereby positioning Christianity as a natural extension or fulfilment of African Traditional Religion. This viewpoint, according to Mndende, reflects a broader trend where African religious and cultural identities have been subsumed or marginalized within Western theological paradigms, reinforcing colonial-era narratives that diminish the authenticity and significance of African spiritual traditions.⁶⁵

⁶³ Michael A. Gomez, "Africans, Religion, and African Religion Through the Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Africana Religions* 1/1 (2013), 78-79.

⁶⁴ Mndende, "From Underground Praxis to Recognized Religion: Challenges facing African Religions", 115.

⁶⁵ Mndende, "From Underground Praxis to Recognized Religion: Challenges Facing African Religions", 118-120.

Turner argues that practitioners of African religions exhibit a wide array of practices, including worship, prayer, sacrifice, construction of altars and temples, pilgrimages to sacred sites, and various other religious beliefs and rituals recognized worldwide as religious phenomena.⁶⁶ While these phenomena are recognised as religious phenomena all over the world, it is unacceptable to consider them as cultural elements in Africa. It is equally problematic to claim that these are practices of a single religion that have undergone changes for various reasons based on certain similarities.

Conclusion

The religions of Africa are not to be disregarded and forgotten through reductionist terms. Colonial and missionary efforts attempted this and failed. Indeed, Africans who converted to Christianity adapted Christian beliefs and rituals to their own needs, establishing their own churches enriched with strong African elements. Christianity was deemed insufficient due to its lack of salvation through magic, protective measures against witchcraft, prophecy methods, and healing practices. For instance, the Yoruba Aladura Church, with approximately 1.5 million members, has leaders who act as healers and prophets. The Zion Church in South Africa, with 5 million followers, and the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth in Zaire serve as examples of such "indigenous" churches. One purpose of these new churches is to break free from external influences and assert control over local Christianity.⁶⁷

The Africanization of Christian churches began particularly after World War II, concurrent with the independence movements developing across Africa.⁶⁸ This period saw a growing awareness and affirmation of African identity among the continent's people, prompting a renewed exploration of Africa's diverse cultures, artistic expressions, and religious traditions. These cultural and intellectual movements underscore the enduring vitality of African religions. Consequently, there is a pressing need to recognize and affirm their significance within academic discourse. This requires a nuanced understanding facilitated by accurate terminology and concepts that respect and reflect the complexities of African religious traditions.

⁶⁶ Harold W. Turner, "The Way Forward in the Religious Study of African Primal Religions", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 12/1 (1981), 4.

⁶⁷ Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 109.

⁶⁸ Wijzen, "Mission Practice and Theory in Africa", 191-193.

To comprehend African religions and Africa itself authentically, researchers must move beyond the term “African Traditional Religion” and its oversimplified connotations. This term, while sometimes adopted to foster an African identity, risks homogenizing diverse spiritual practices that vary greatly across regions and cultures within Africa. Each of these traditions possesses intrinsic value and insights into the complex fabric of African societies. It is crucial for scholars to approach these religions with sensitivity to their diversity and dynamic nature, avoiding reductionist frameworks imposed by colonial or Western perspectives. By embracing nuanced terminology and respecting the autonomy of African religious expressions, researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding that honours the richness and vitality of Africa's spiritual heritage.

Describing African peoples simply as "African" oversimplifies their rich diversity of ethnic identities and reduces complex cultural heritages to a singular label. Similarly, categorizing African religions under a singular term like "African Traditional Religion" risks homogenizing diverse spiritual practices that vary significantly across different regions and ethnic groups. This approach not only fails to acknowledge the unique characteristics and nuances of each religious tradition but also undermines their intrinsic value and depth. Embracing such terminology often leads to overlooking or devaluing the intricate beliefs, rituals, and social functions that define these religions within their respective communities. It is essential for researchers and scholars to adopt a more nuanced and respectful approach that recognizes the multifaceted nature of African identities and religious practices, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Africa's cultural richness and diversity.

The colonial perspective that simplifies Africa as a mere geographical entity inhabited by a monolithic population of people with black skin, and their religions as a singular and uniform entity, fails to recognize the intricate diversity and complexity within African societies and belief systems. This perspective often employs terms like “Supreme God” to generalize across various African religions, implying a deistic deity that is passive or distant in many traditions. However, detailed research within specific communities reveals that, these religions exhibit nuanced beliefs where the Creator God is actively involved in worldly affairs. Such oversimplifications not only misrepresent the rich tapestry of African religious practices but also undermine the importance of understanding each tradition on its own terms. To truly grasp African religions and cultures, it is essential to approach them with

sensitivity to their specific contexts, histories, and diverse expressions, rather than imposing external categories or interpretations that obscure their unique features and dynamics.

Researchers of African religions should prioritize fidelity to the terminologies and conceptual frameworks of the communities they study. It is essential to describe and name observed phenomena using the indigenous languages and terms of those communities, rather than imposing external or comparative labels that may not fully capture the depth and specificity of their beliefs. For example, using terms like "angels" to describe spiritual entities in African contexts, merely because they share superficial similarities with angels in other religious traditions, can oversimplify complex spiritual beliefs and practices. While making comparisons can facilitate initial understanding, it is crucial not to overlook or obscure important distinctions and unique aspects of African religious traditions. Therefore, researchers must approach their study with a commitment to nuanced interpretation and respect for the indigenous perspectives and languages that shape these religious expressions. This approach not only enhances the accuracy of scholarly discourse but also honours the diversity and richness of African religions.

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