The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion

Edited by
Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe · Toyin Falola
The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion
Acknowledgments

The completion of this book could not have been achieved without the contributions of several key participants. Therefore, we would like to thank many colleagues and friends who guided and provided various forms of assistance associated with compiling and reviewing the contributed chapters. In specific terms, we would like to thank Dr. (Mrs.) Olutola Akindipe for coordinating the communications with contributors regarding the invitation, submission, and compilation of chapters and associated materials. Also, we are grateful to Dr. David Olali, Bukunmi Ogunsola, Olumida Ajayi, and Samaria Divine for assisting in converting and standardizing the referencing formats. In addition, Alexis Mulkey deserves special mention for the final review of the chapters.

Our contributors also deserve immense gratitude for their patience in bearing with us throughout producing the book, particularly with our several requests for corrections and submissions of associated materials. We would like you to know that without your contributed chapters, this book would not have materialized. We believe that this project’s success would serve as enough compensation for the inconveniences and the amount of hard work you invested.

Finally, Palgrave Macmillan’s publication team deserves our special gratitude for being patient and bearing with sometimes unusual logistical difficulties and delays in meeting deadlines. We appreciate the amount of hard work of the team in the successful production of this book.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Handbook of African Traditional Religion

Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe and Toyin Falola

There is hardly any doubt that the practice and study of African Traditional Religion have generated significant interest globally. Such interest is clearly traceable to the importance of religion as the “barometer” of the African spiritual and cultural hegemonies that have shaped the fundamental identities of African ethnic groups and societies both on the continent and in the Diaspora. Unfortunately, the high levels of interest have not been matched with the same levels of recognition, acceptance, or even respect for the religion as a competing partner in the global religious space—both as an “authentic” practicing religion and as a theologically grounded faith worthy of adherence and serious intellectual or academic engagements.

This situation has been further compounded by the advents of Christianity and Islam on the African continent. The two religions have successfully decimated African Traditional Religion at its “home base” by securing the loyalty of the vast majority of the African population between the two over the centuries. Also, the Christian and Islamic hostilities toward and dismissiveness of the religious/spiritual worthiness of African Traditional Religion are legendary. Indeed, such attitudes constitute the center of their salvific propagations. For

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I. S. Aderibigbe, T. Falola (eds.), The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89500-6_1
example, Christianity regards African Traditional Religion as paganism, while Islam consigned it to al-Jahiliyya, the time of barbarism.

However, it is important to acknowledge that some attention has been given to the concerns raised above, no matter the arguable inadequacies. The efforts at addressing the concerns have emerged in different forms and strategies. They consisted of pro-active engagements in formal and informal organizational paradigms of conferences, symposia, workshops, among others, to create and advance better understanding and, by extension, greater appreciation of both the practice and study of African Traditional Religion. Indeed, there have been countless numbers of such activities both in and outside of the African continent. The second addresses the nature, content, and focus of literature available in African Traditional Religion. As scholarly engagements, the efforts have documented the findings and views of various scholars on different aspects of the beliefs, practices, and study of African Traditional Religion. Worthy of mention here is the foundational yet, pivotal works of E. Bolaji Idowu, Joseph Omosade Awolalu, Edward Geoffrey Parrinder, John S. Mbiti, Kofi Asare Opoku, and Peter Adelumbo Dopamu, among others. Their works, no doubt, have created a platform that has been instrumental to the growth of scholarship in African Traditional Religion, particularly the fundamental philosophical and religious beliefs and practices. Such works have highlighted African religion’s essence in its holistic worldview of blending the divine and mundane spaces.

However, such works should be appropriately credited with laying only the foundation on which there should always be the need to build upon significantly. Consequently, these efforts should necessarily entail a deliberate re-situating and re-examining of the religion’s beliefs and practices to account for their relevance in contemporary dynamics of global competitive religious space, in beliefs, in practices, and in study. It is also important that such efforts are not limited to just the nature and structure of the religion’s beliefs and practices. They must transcend these fundamentals to explore the contents and discontents, exhibiting currency and the transformations that have taken place with regard to the religion. There should always be probing further and further, not only to delve into the basic components of beliefs and practices of the religion, but also more importantly to demonstrate its interconnectedness with other religious traditions globally in shaping cultural, historical, social, and political issues as they emerge at every turn of human and societal developments.

It is precisely within this context that this *Handbook of African Traditional Religion* becomes relevant and unique as a comprehensive volume. Such relevance and uniqueness entail two-dimensional strategies. The first is to avoid observed “limitations” of available works on African Religion. The second is to provide a more robust and comprehensive objective, focus, content, scope, organization, and contributions combining both the basic components with the desired contemporary orientations. Thus, the volume can be seen, not just as an apologetic three in defense of the religion but more significantly as a holistic or comprehensive manual.
In achieving these twofold objectives, the Handbook begins with an Introductory Chap. 1. The subsequent chapters are then divided into three parts. The first part consists of Chaps. 2 to 19. These chapters focus essentially on the nature, structure, and significance of African Traditional Religion’s beliefs and practices. However, at the same time, they attempt to provide narratives and explore their interpretative and influence dynamics. In addition, these chapters seek to address the evolving sustainability strategies of the beliefs and practices of the religion as an authentic spiritual-religious tradition. Part II, consisting of Chaps. 20 to 36, shifts the focus to contemporary interconnectivity of issues in African Traditional Religion. Contributors through these chapters explore the contents and discontents of the interconnectedness of African Traditional Religion with various social, political, economic, and ethical issues dominating contemporary discourses. They also situate African Religion in its contacts and interface with the two dominant religions on the continent—Christianity and Islam. Also, the transition and transformation of African Traditional Religion in the Diaspora are discussed. Chapters 37 to 46 are in Part III. Issues discussed in this section are associated with academic and scholarship in African Religion. Essentially, these chapters seek to approach this task in two formats. The first explores the challenges of and furthering African Religion’s teaching in institutions both on the African continent and globally. The second is uniquely designed to review some selected key or prominent foundation scholars/writers in African Traditional Religion.

Consequently, covered in 46 chapters, this volume, the *Handbook of African Traditional Religion*, interrogates and presents robust and comprehensive contributions from interdisciplinary experts and scholars. This is to achieve the ultimate objective of proffering balanced opinions of the authors of these chapters through the prism of understanding the past about African indigenous religion and, more importantly, capturing its dynamics in the present and projecting its sustainability and relevance for the future. There is also no doubt that the contents and discontents discourses articulated by a diverse pool of authors will undoubtedly promote informed sources of knowledge and understanding of African Traditional Religion in the global space of religious traditions. Therefore, in specific terms and to harness and synthesize these contributions, these chapters are summarized as follows:

The Introductory Chap. 1 constitutes the general introduction to the Handbook focusing on aims, objective, and focus of the book. It also presents a synthesis of each of the chapters of the book. It concludes with the significance, uniqueness, and target audiences of the book.
PART I: BASIC OR ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe’s Chap. 2 starts off presenting essential features of African Traditional Religion with a detailed discussion on the religion’s fundamental beliefs and practices. This is done through a discourse that illuminates awareness and understanding of the religion’s nature and structure. This discussion also emphasizes the comprehensiveness of the religion as an inseparable part of the African people’s total life experience in that it understandably permeates every sphere of the people’s lives. It encompasses their culture, the social, the political, and ethical, as well as the individual and societal expectations—serving as the cornerstone of every aspect of African “ways of life.” The chapter further attempts to succinctly but thoroughly dispel Western misrepresentations and misinterpretations of African Traditional Religion by highlighting its features as a viable and unique religious tradition in its own right. Finally, Aderibigbe explores both the internal and external challenges facing religion in today’s contemporary world’s sacred space. He argues that despite these challenges, the religion has a bright prospect of future existence and relevance in global religious space, particularly in its Diaspora complexities—known as African Derived Religion.

In Chap. 3, Olutola Akindipe advances discussion on the fundamentals of African Traditional Religion, dwelling on its tremendous influence on Africans’ perspective not only on the continent but also among the African Diaspora despite stiff competition from other foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam. The author, however, concentrates her discussion on the sociological paradigm. In doing this, she employs some concepts from Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. The theory is used to understand African Tradition Religion worshippers’ functional prisms of beliefs in the existence of a Supreme Being, spirits, ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine. She argues that the survival of the religion, despite many challenges, is consequent upon the formidable socio-cultural dynamics provided by such functional beliefs and practices. Akindipe then submits that there is a lot to understand in applying this theory to African Traditional Religion. However, she argues that the theory should provide an understanding of the underlying perspective of African religious worshippers in their socio-cultural environment. This understanding ultimately suggests the continued existence and sustenance of African Traditional Religion now and in the future.

In turning away from the general discussion on the fundamental nature and structure of African Traditional Religion, Alloy S. Ihuah and Zaato M. Nor, in Chap. 4, open the discourse on specific concepts, beliefs, and religions’ practices. Here, the authors focus on the metaphysical and ontological concepts. The chapter begins with basic definitions, explanations, and characteristics of metaphysics and ontology as universal concepts. It then details the two concepts’ functionalities in understanding both the physical and transcendent realms in which human beings exist and participate in paradoxical relationships.
combining the two as reality paradigms. After this general description of the concepts’ characteristics and significance, the authors proceed to give a detailed expository account of the different metaphysical and ontological concepts in the African Traditional Religion. This is effected through a predominantly expository and deconstructive examination of the Africans’ existential worldview that encompasses and shapes African people’s totality as spiritual entities.

In Chap. 5, Dorothy Nguemo Afoar continues discussing specific beliefs and practices of African Traditional Religion. She focuses on the concept and worship of the Supreme Being in the religion. The author begins the chapter with the argument of the universality of the belief in a spiritual being who is the creator and sustainer of the universe, and human beings occupying it. She then submits that this belief is also prevalent among African people as expressed through their religious worldview. According to the author, this worldview provides fundamental understandings of African peoples’ devotion to this creator through their various worship rituals. However, she endeavors to explain the reality of the diversity of application of such worship rituals. This leads the author to argue that despite a general belief in a Supreme Being, there are differences in applications in specific terms. Therefore, while a strictly monotheistic approach is adopted among some ethnic groups, in others, it is not so clear, and this has led to the perspective that the religion is polytheistic among such ethnic groups. The author concludes that these differences, notwithstanding the concept and worship of a Supreme Being, are fundamental to the practice of African Traditional Religion.

For Lydia Bosede Akande and Olatunde Oyewole Ogunbiyi in Chap. 6, their concentration is on the dynamics of beliefs and veneration of divinities in African Traditional Religion. The chapter starts by illuminating and stressing the significant position occupied by divinities in the religion. It then discusses the relevance of such a belief and how and why it does not contradict the belief in one Supreme Being in African religious consciousness. Having clarified this, the authors focus on detailing the divinities’ categories beginning from the relatively unknown divinities to the very prominent ones. They also attempt to examine the transition and sustenance of belief and veneration practices of the African continent’s divinities in the African Diaspora. The authors also posit that the divinities occupy an intermediary position between the Supreme Being and the world. According to the authors, this functional role of divinities and the efficacy attributed to it have ensured unassailable recognition and veneration among practitioners of the religion both on the African continent and on its Diaspora. Finally, the authors believe that given the current revitalization and rejuvenation of African Traditional Religion, there is every indication that it will exist for a long time.

In a discussion on beliefs and veneration of Ancestors in African Traditional Religion, Benson Ohohon Igboin, in Chap. 7, explores how and why these have assumed a pivotal place and influence for religion practitioners. According to the author, this perspective is singularly linked to their conviction of the nearness of the ancestors to the living in terms of commonality and spirituality.
and because they are believed to reincarnate in new babies. The chapter then focuses on both the reality of the existence of the “spiritual domain” of the ancestors and also the required qualifications for the revered position. Such qualifications are tied to the ancestors’ pristine standing in various life stations in the community’s moral, economic, political, and religious accretions while they were alive. Also, the author situates the beliefs and veneration of ancestors in the contemporary African and global religious spaces. This is achieved by the author interrogating the characteristics and conditions that admitted people into their ancestors’ communion. He then argues that such conditions need to be interpreted in light of contemporary reality. He concludes that if this is done, there would be a re-conceptualization of ancestor veneration that would be at once ancient and modern. Essentially, this will promote a reflective dynamism of African Traditional Religion as a living faith, not just for today but also for the future.

In Chap. 8, Kelvin Onongha takes up examining the beliefs and practices of Magic and Medicine. The author opens the discussion by submitting that the beliefs in the existence and efficacy of magic and medicine are very strong in African Traditional Religion. He then compares and contrasts the two concepts based on definitions and explanations while noting that in some cultures and languages, the terms used for both are similar and are often practiced by the same person as a profession. However, along the same vein, the author alludes to the distinctions that may characterize the two. Thus, he describes magic as a form of cosmic power that may be used for good or evil, often through manipulating spiritual entities.

On the other hand, medicine is seen as the engagement of cosmic powers of spiritual agencies to prevent and heal illnesses. The chapter then focuses on exploring the significance that magic and medicine beliefs have in African Traditional Religion, both in the past and until the present. In conclusion, the author examines the functional impacts of magic and medicine’s beliefs and practices in the lives of Africans in the traditional setting and now in contemporary realities. He then highlights developing revolutionary factors contributing to their continued practices even in a modern technological age.

Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe returns in Chap. 9. This time focusing on cosmological and ontological beliefs in African Traditional Religion. The chapter opens with the author, indicating that the beliefs as narratives are usually embedded as themes of various African ethnic groups’ oral traditions. They are also very important in drawing attention to the true or authentic exposition and understanding of the religion, without which such an understanding will not be complete. This is because they constitute the essential starting points in any meaningful discourse of Africans’ traditional religious worldview regarding the relationships between humans and the Supreme Being in particular and between the mundane and the spiritual spaces in general. In alluding to this position in specific terms, the author submits that the dynamics are prisms of the African “theology.” That “theology” or doctrine explains not just the origins of human beings (individually and collectively) and the universe itself, but
also their envisaged ends ultimately. For a meaningful understanding of this "theology," the chapter focuses on its three thematic components—the creation and nature of the world, the creation and nature of human beings, and the relationship between humans and the Supreme Being. The author discusses the themes by addressing the overall significance as paradigms of the beginning and end stations of humans and the universe. Particularly in that, they reflect the "outcomes" of cosmic destinies, instituted, sustained, and executed as divine pre-determined "journeys" for humans and the universe. The agencies employed by the author are mythical narratives from some African ethnic groups in their similarities and differences located in oral sources of the people.

Discussions on liturgy, rituals, traditions, sacrifices, and festivals in African Traditional Religion constitute the focus of Chap. 10. The author, Mensah A. Osei, refers to these religious components as forms of customary public worship. According to him, they are means of communication with the Supreme Being and ancestors within the context of worship. The adherents of African Traditional Religion, for example, utilize the media of traditional festivals to mark important religious, social, and cultural events in the lives of the people or their community. Usually, activities during such festivals culminate in a series of performances, entertainments, rites and rituals, liturgies, and sacrifices as forms of worship to communicate with the divine. The author also submits that individual and communal values for the community’s well-being are promoted during the festivals. Viewed from this perspective, the liturgical rituals and sacrifices embedded in the celebrations provide epitomes of traditional cultural-educational paradigms. Based on all these characteristics, the author highlights and discusses the importance of festivals with illustrations from some ethnic groups in West Africa. In conclusion, he avers that promoting rejuvenized and contemporary compliant traditional festivals will give currency to the meaning and relevance of the festivals in the social, political, and religious life of the participants celebrating them. Also, such dynamics are needed if the festivals are to survive and remain significant for future generations of Africans.

In Chap. 11, “African Circle of Life,” Segun Ogungbemi gives a general explanation of this concept in African Traditional Religion as a doctrine of the religion predicated on the ontological and cosmological nature of human existence. While the ontological component speaks of human beings deriving their existence from the Supreme Being, the cosmological equally alludes to the creation of the universe by the same Supreme Being. A combination of the two’s dynamics and processes as a doctrine addresses the Africans’ belief that human beings enjoy a continuous existence that is paradoxically shared between the mundane and spiritual domains. Such navigation of existence between the two domains constitutes the dynamics of the concept of “circle of life.” Enjoying this form of eternal existence is further predicated on the Africans’ belief in ancestorship. This belief denotes that souls of ancestors who had lived morally upright lives while in the mundane domain can be reincarnated in their immediate family or clan. The author subjects the African doctrine of the circle
of life to a rigorous interrogation employing rational arguments to unravel the religious interpretations of its narratives of myths, paradoxes, and contradictions. The author concludes that African forebears have left behind the concept of the circle of life as a practical demonstration that death is not the end of life. However, the present generation and future generations should employ the scientific and robotic engineering available to them to navigate such a belief and accord it the necessary contemporary functional interpretation. The author, therefore, suggests that this portends the only format in which life could be said to be a continuum as intended in the African doctrine of the “circle of life.”

In Chap. 12, Segun Ogungbemi continues with African themes of life, death, and the hereafter. He begins with the question of why it is that, of all the living things in the universe, it is only human beings who concern themselves with the phenomenon of death and the afterlife. In addressing this all-important question, the author highlights the narratives associated with the phenomenon in African Traditional Religion, particularly before foreign religions’ thoughts began to influence such narratives. The chapter then goes on to navigate the traditional epistemological expressions addressing the phenomenon. It further addresses the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual dispositions available in the traditional African religious settings about the phenomenon and how these may now be challenged by those with modern civilization perspectives. After interrogating the African traditional doctrines on death, burial rites, and the afterlife, the author submits a paradigm shift in epistemological applications. However, he further argues that such a shift should not be seen as a total rejection of the traditional paradigm but its rational revisitation. He concludes that such an exercise is likely to show that while these were the best epistemological explanations available to African forefathers at the time, such explanations may not necessarily be adequate or relevant for the present descendants and future generations.

Continuing with the themes of life, death, and the hereafter in Chap. 13, Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe examines the interconnectivity of the beliefs in reincarnation and eschatology in African Traditional Religion. The author states that this connectivity, though more glaringly evident in African Traditional Religion, can also be found in other religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and the Native American religion. Also, he submits that belief in reincarnation is fundamental to African Traditional Religions’ doctrine of the “circle of life,” which has significant implications for Africans’ belief in eschatology. He then refers to this connectivity as a paradigm of relationships between the mundane and spiritual domains that demonstrates that reincarnation is the reality of an end status for the individual and the cosmos. The chapter then focuses on integrating this connectivity and its implications as a “theology” of the paradoxical relationship of human existence in the physical world and “end” destination in the spiritual domain. To give a concrete demonstration of this, the author focuses on two ethnic groups as case studies: Yoruba and Illa.
Interestingly, the two ethnic groups represent the two types of reincarnation in African Traditional Religion—partial reincarnation and universal reincarnation. The characteristics and application of the two typologies are highlighted and explained in detail. The chapter finally discusses the implications of the linkage between reincarnating and eschatology. The submission here is that from the perspective of African Traditional Religion, this linkage, through the implications involved, presents the crucial explanations for the circle of life of the individual human being and the end envisaged for not just them but also for the universe they live in.

In Chap. 14, Danoye Oguntola-Laguda shifts the discussion from basic beliefs and practices to their custodians, called religious leaders, with their different roles. Here, the focus is on Priests/Priestesses, Medicine Professionals, and Kings. The author opens with the all-important statement on the importance of leadership in any religious institution and the challenges or problems that may develop if the style and quality of such leadership are questioned. The consequences of poor, ineffective, or even morally bankrupt leadership usually lead to an inability for development and growth in such religious organizations. Coming specifically to African Traditional Religion concerning the priests/priestesses, medical professionals, and kings, Laguda extensively discusses how the quality of their leadership roles has impacted religion’s development and growth. His opinion is that these leaders have not measured up to the standard based on several vices he identifies and discusses. Using the Yoruba ethnic group as a case study, Laguda seeks to identify and critically examine these religious leaders’ anticipated roles, focusing on the religious, economic, social, political, and cultural lives of the adherents of the religion in particular and the relevant society in general. He concludes the chapter with suggestions on how these leaders can meet the required expectations and thereby enhance the practice and relevance of the religion presently and in the future.

In Chap. 15, titled “Illnesses and Cures,” Kelvin Onongha writes on how the occurrences of illnesses and their cures have been addressed in traditional African society. Because illnesses and their cures are not regarded as just physiological but also spiritual in nature, they have always constituted a very important aspect of African Traditional Religion. Indeed, the belief in medicine, under which they are addressed, is usually seen as a significant belief in the religion. Thus, as traditional medical practitioners, traditional healers have always occupied an essential and indispensable place in African society. The author highlights and discusses the role these traditional healers have always played from one generation to the other in various African communities. He alludes to the fact they have always enjoyed clientele. He also states that the diagnostic and treatment methods they employed have been transmitted from generation to generation orally and through apprenticeship. Such methods of diagnosis often entail observation, inquiry, and in some cases, consultation with divinities to discern the cause of the disease condition and the necessary treatment procedure. The author also raises and discusses the advent of modern medical science in Africa today. However, while he accepts that this has