

# CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIONS IN AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

EDITED BY IBIGBOLADE S. ADERIBIGBE  
AND CAROLYN M. JONES MEDINE



Contemporary Perspectives on Religions in  
Africa and the African Diaspora

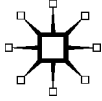
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THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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*IBIGBOLADE S. ADERIBIGBE AND  
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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIONS IN AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA  
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Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe:  
To  
My late parents,  
Omoparusi and Folashade Aderibigbe;  
My wife,  
Moradeke Abimbola;  
My children,  
Moronkeji,  
Oluwaninyo,  
and Ifedolapo;  
My students, past, present, and future;  
And  
All from whom I obtained knowledge,  
to make it available to others.

Carolyn M. Jones Medine:  
To my husband, Scott Medine, who is my ongoing support,  
cheerleader, and partner in all I do

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## Introduction

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# Contemporary Perspectives on African and African Diaspora Religions

*Carolyn M. Jones Medine and  
Ibigbolade Aderibigbe*

The scholarly study of African traditional and African diaspora religious traditions has generated immense interest within and outside the African continent, involving questions about the nature and scope of African and African-derived religions, as well as their relevance in a global world. In the past, African religion, as an academic discipline, often was apologetic in nature, and scholars who were interested in this field had to grapple with the problem of inadequate literature for study. They, therefore, relied on oral sources with all their attendant limitations.

With all these limitations, the pivotal efforts of early scholars—such as Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Omosafe Awolalu, Geoffrey Parrinder, Asare Opoku, and Ade Dopamu, among others—have provided a platform on which modern scholarship on African religion has grown. The foundation these scholars laid opened the study of African religion to examine contemporary developments and global issues, like ecological devastation. Yet there is an ongoing need to resituate and to reexamine scholarly engagements in Africa indigenous religion.

These religious forms predate, adapt to, and survive colonial occupation and, therefore, issues of contact and competitive interactions with other world religions, both on the African continent and in the diaspora, must be accounted for, within the contexts of sociological, pedagogical, environmental, political, and existential dynamics of the evolving global religious space of the twenty-first century and beyond. The discussion includes the importance and significance of sustained discourse on the elements of the beliefs and practices of the variety of religious forms by Africans both on the continent and in the diaspora. A meaningful discourse must be aware of the existing realities of global competition for relevance, influence, and adherents—the reality that African indigenous religion shares the African

continental space with other religious traditions, such as Christianity, Islam, and, in recent years, Asian-derived religions.

The religious landscape of Africa hosts all these forms in their “pure” and hybrid forms, in competitive coexistence. The ugly history of slavery also has an impact on African religions as African indigenous religious beliefs and cultures crossed the oceans, particularly to the Americas. These African-derived religions survive in various forms. Further, contemporary forms of migration have witnessed not only movement of peoples but also religions, once again, across the oceans and landscapes. Not only indigenous religions but African forms of Christianity and Islam have entered North America and become a significant part of the continent’s religious space.

This book, *Contemporary Perspectives on Religions in Africa and the African Diaspora*, seeks to address some of the issues we have highlighted, examining, first, the nature of religious traditions in Africa, along with other major religious traditions on the continent; second, African-derived religions and how they shape the life of Africans outside the continent; and third, reflects on the discourse of transplantation, migration, religions, and religious identities in the United States of America across time.

We seek, though not exhaustively, of course, to identify and examine African and African diaspora religions and the impact they have in and on the diverse terrains in which they are found.

Our source and objective for this volume is our many years of research and teaching both in Africa and in the United States. The challenge of finding sources for students, and for ourselves as teachers and scholars, is a great one. This work, we hope, will make a contribution to research *and teaching*.

## Chapters

In chapter 1, Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe offers an overview of the religious traditions in Africa, arguing that African traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam are the religious heritage of the African continent and that this heritage has a deep influence on identity and community on the continent. The practice of African traditional religion can be traced to the emergence of the African peoples and their cultures, while Christianity and Islam made contact with Africa in the Common Era. Aderibigbe examines the influence of the three traditions on multiple dimensions of African life—the social, economic, and political—on a whole continent in its diversity.

In chapter 2, Rotimi Williams Omotoye examines modern efforts by scholars in the study and teaching of African religion in Africa and other parts of the world, focusing on the notion of decolonization: that is, the analysis of materials and texts from the perspective of African worldview and culture. Omotoye argues that this positionality of the scholar can address and begin to correct Eurocentric misconceptions about African religion.

In chapter 3, Francis Adewale Olajide addresses the task of mapping the philosophical relevance of African religions. Focusing on the persistence of religion in the

face of secularity, Olajide turns to a philosophical examination of African religions, taking into account the potential violence of religion in a global world.

Oguntola Oye-Laguda, in chapter 4, argues that the “transparency”—in liturgy, doctrine, and social formation—of Islam and Christianity has made them potentially dominant religions on the African continent. He addresses the characterization of African religions as primitive, retrogressive, and “satanic,” taking into account secrecy, as well as lack of written creed and scriptures. He suggests that, for any religious tradition to thrive on the continent, it must, at least, address and, at most, acclimate to the characteristics and features of the dominant practices.

Kevin Onogha, in chapter 5, examines the challenges for health care delivery on the African continent. These, he argues, are increasing rather than declining. Studies reveal that Africa alone carries about a quarter of the global disease burden, although it shares barely 1.3 percent of the world’s health care workers. To deal with issues of health in Africa, he contends, one must take into serious account religion, the supernatural, and mystical causation, as well as traditional practices (magic, mana, and method), and a holistic worldview, that includes right relationship with the living and the dead.

In chapter 6, Rotimi Williams Omotoye examines discussions of the environment and the place of religion, as a phenomenon, in these discussions. His chapter, therefore, examines the dynamics of the African indigenous religion and Christianity within the context of ethical paradigms and the environment. Omotoye moves beyond environment to examine the issue of landscape, particularly of the religious significance of mountains in Yoruba religion.

Pius Oyeniran Abioje, in chapter 7, recognizes the impact that Christianity has had in Africa. After providing a brief history of the religion on the continent, he examines its position in the plurality of the African religious landscape and the quality of its influence, seeking to elucidate the factors that promote both the growth and the decline of Christianity in Africa. He finds that Christianity, though a majority religion, is not spread evenly throughout the continent and is not always dominant; therefore, it faces challenges in its current dominance of African spaces.

R. Ibrahim Adebayo examines, in chapter 8, the other powerful religion in Africa, Islam. Recognizing that Islam was in Africa before other continents, he explores its warm reception on the continent and its impact on literacy, governance, and healing, for example. The chapter examines cooperation and tensions between African traditional religions and Islam, as well as the positive impact of Islam on the continent. This chapter explores the use and abuse of the religion in Africa in recent times, offering suggestions to restore the glory of the religion in Africa and on other continents.

In chapter 9, M. I. Oguntoyinbo-Atere begins the discussion of diasporic African-derived religions, exported to the Americas by enslaved Africans. Oguntoyinbo-Atere seeks to examine these religions as they were, as they have survived, and as they have provided a spirituality and structure for the Africans in slavery and beyond. The influence of Christianity on African religions is a key element of this chapter.

Adeoluwa Okunade provides, in chapter 10, a general overview of music and religion in Africa as well as how these come together in African diaspora religions, particularly in Cuba and Brazil. Okunade’s fieldwork in Salvador-Bahai is featured

in this chapter, demonstrating to the reader the presence and importance of oral transmission and performance of African-derived religions that has created a lasting legacy of African religions in the New World.

In chapter 11, Carolyn Medine examines the contributions of and complicated place of women in the African diaspora, examining the issue of voice. After examining black women on the slave ship, this chapter concentrates on two figures, Patsey in *Twelve Years a Slave*, both slave narrative and film, and Sojourner Truth, to examine the complicated transmission of black women's experience in the diaspora, particularly in the multivocal slave narrative and "Ar'n't I a Woman?" speech of Sojourner Truth.

Melanie L. Harris turns to more contemporary women in chapter 12. Harris argues that the aim of womanist religious thought is to uncover the voices, wisdom, and critical theological reflection that emerge from the lives, moral values, and experiences of women of African descent. She turns to a powerful womanist voice—indeed, to the person who coined the term: Alice Walker. Harris explores Walker's fluid spirituality, through her essays, as a foundation for an ecojustice perspective. Harris shows us that studying Walker's nonfiction work summons us to add earth-justice to womanist religious ethical analysis.

In chapter 13, Umesh Patel turns to a theme in Medine's chapter: how the slave ship "made" slaves, but how, ironically, religious resistance began on the ships and continued, particularly in the Caribbean. Patel examines the use of masking and processes of adaptation through which African-derived religions survived the Middle Passage, maintaining the essence, if not the particular form, of home away from home.

Osei A. Mensah in chapter 14, reviews some of the religious practices of devotees of Santería and Vodun in the Americas. Mensah argues that rituals and sacrifices that take place in the New World may vary, but he examines pervasive patterns of New World religions, focusing on myth, ritual, sacrifice, and methods of communication with the *orisha*. Mensah also examines how African-derived practices have influenced other migrant practices. The relationship of the individual to the spirit world is the connection, Mensah argues, between the old world and the new.

Robert Y. Owusu continues the discussion of Santería in chapter 15, in which he looks at the origin, beliefs, and rituals of Santería religion, its transmission into the United States, and contemporary forms of the religion, particularly as they have affected issues of class. Owusu argues that Santería is not syncretic but creolized, and he returns to an argument made by Oguntola Oye-Laguda, in chapter 4, that African-derived religions were viewed as evil because they involve divination, incantation, spirit possession or trance, sacrifice, and a focus on the here and now rather than a future spiritual home.

In chapter 16, Danielle Boaz turns to legal issues in modern practice of African diaspora religions. She focuses on ritual sacrifice, issues of health, and reception of African-derived religions as reasons that African diaspora religions have had legal difficulties in the West, particularly in the British Caribbean, South Africa, and the United States. Boaz traces legal objections from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century, highlighting the colonial legislative remnants in

the criminalization of religion and the stereotypes, sensationalism, and misunderstanding of African derived religions.

In chapter 17, Maha Marouan analyzes the challenge of audience in teaching and speaking about African and African diaspora religions. Continuing Boaz's recognition of the negative stereotypes of such religions, Marouan recognizes that there is no neutral place from which to begin a discussion of these religions, particularly in the American South where she taught and wrote. Undoing perceptions of "the primitive" and the idea that Africa has no power on the world stage are issues that Marouan addresses. She also examines the academy's implicatedness in the negative constructions of Africa in "world religion" textbooks despite the fact that African religions are part of the remapping of the modern world.

Ibigbolade Aderibigbe's voice returns in chapter 18, in which he examines the transnational dimensions of religious identities and institutions in relation to the recent African immigrants in the United States. He describes, particularly, African-initiated Christian churches in Europe and the United States of America. The dynamics of the practices of these churches, he suggests, both conform to and differ from the identities and values of the "home" churches in Africa. Like Umesh Patel in chapter 13, he invokes the structure of home, arguing that these churches function as "homes away from home" for African immigrants in the search for integration and self-identity in a new and sometimes hostile environment.

In chapter 19, Yushua Sodiq looks at Islamic communities in the United States, thinking about issues of religion and political identity. Sodiq examines the quest for a relevant Muslim identity in the American experience. Immigrants, she contends, have brought a sense of self that undergoes constant revision and redefinition in the context of the American melting (boiling?) pot. This identity is influenced by what the immigrants bring with them as well as by their American experience, including American foreign policy in various Muslim countries. Many factors influence the reception of Muslims in America, but 9/11 has, Sodiq argues, deeply influenced how they have been received, creating what Muslims feel is a hostile American environment in which they are being held accountable for the activities of others overseas.

This volume consciously interrogates the experiences of a variety of African and African diaspora religious practices. It attempts to supply clear information about these traditions and to analyze them in multiple ways. Our contention is that multi- and interdisciplinary approaches are necessary for grappling with the complexity and plurality of African religion and African diaspora religions, neither of which is one unified belief or practice.

# Chapter 1

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## Religious Traditions in Africa: An Overview of Origins, Basic Beliefs, and Practices

*Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe*

### Introduction

Africa is a massive continent with diverse religious traditions, to the extent that within the same tradition there have been variations. The three main religious traditions—African traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam—constitute the triple religious heritage of the African continent. This heritage, though contemporarily more dynamically evidenced, has a long history and influence. In the case of African traditional religion, it can be traced back to the very beginning of the emergence of African peoples. For Christianity, it is the first century AD, and maybe beyond; and for Islam the seventh century. The central place of religion that has become so evident in any meaningful understanding of African life in all its ramifications—social, economic, and political—gives credence to Mbiti's statement that African people are "notoriously religious."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Africans have evolved and sustained religiously conscious communities, either as devotees of the traditional religion, or as followers of the two "converting religions"—Christianity and Islam.

It would be an impossible task to cover in this chapter the totality of all religious traditions in Africa. Consequently, the effort here can only be an exploration of the three principal religious traditions on the continent, namely: African indigenous religious beliefs and practices, which African scholarship has "christened" African traditional religion(s),<sup>2</sup> Christianity, and Islam. The focus, therefore, is on the African experience(s) of the religious traditions within the contexts of their origins, beliefs, doctrines, and practices as worldviews permeating and influencing various aspects of the African people's life.

In exploring the worldviews of the three religions in Africa, it is imperative to indicate certain initial operating parameters that may affect the discourse. First, African traditional religion has no sacred scriptures or clearly defined documents. Indeed, serious studies in the religion have only recently developed.<sup>3</sup> Even then, the studies have been largely carried out by sociologists, anthropologists, and theologians, who are “outsiders” to the religion as either “non-Africans” or Africans who are Christians, and most times have very limited knowledge of the experiences of the actual devotees of the religion. Consequently, the “authentic” source of information about the religion is embedded in oral traditions found in myths, rituals, folktales, proverbs, etcetera, and nonoral sources, such as archaeological findings, African arts of paintings, sculptures, music, and dance.

The studies of the Christian and Islamic traditions pose no difficulties with regard to sources of information. Both religions have sacred books. In addition, the founders, geographical origins, and organizational structures are well articulated and remain largely the same for the adherents, regardless of the different interpretations. However, both Christianity and Islam are regarded as “foreign” to the African continent and its peoples. For example, Christianity’s advent into Africa in the first century, majorly in North Africa, was cut short by the advent of Islam in the seventh century. Its attempts in sub-Saharan religion only became successful with the involvement of the missionaries under the protection and impetus of the colonialists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though Islam gained the control of North Africa from the seventh century, it, however, had very little impact, if any, in the sub-Saharan regions until the later part of the eighteenth century and more effectively in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, similar to its Christian counterpart.

However, these limitations found in varying degrees in the three principal African religious traditions until the seventeenth century, did not necessarily diminish the growing impacts of the three religions in shaping the spiritual thoughts, beliefs, and practices of Africans, and eventually blossoming and becoming the predominant religions on the continent. This is true particularly with regard to Christianity and Islam. We begin our exploration with the African traditional religion drawing substantially from the sub-Saharan Africa.

## African Traditional Religion

African traditional religion(s) has no sacred books or definitive experience in creed upon which to base any organized or systematic analysis; yet, there are unique basic characteristics that clearly designate the religion as a universal religious phenomenon all over Africa. A unique characteristic of the religion is its embellishment in the heritage of the African people. This heritage, of which African religion is not just a part, is a very symbolic manifestation and is ultimately concretized in a religious belief system discernible through common components. The African heritage is rich culturally and has been sustained through a long lineage of.<sup>4</sup> However, many of its elements have been lost; others

have undergone changes due to the dynamics of other internal modifications and expansions at contacts with influences from outside cultures. The basic or fundamental beliefs and practices have remained intact. One other important element of African heritage is its diversity—characterized by both similarities and local differences. This makes it a unique agency of a people's "world outlook" steeped in unity and diversity. Thus, the popular dictum, "Africans are in all things religious."<sup>5</sup> The religion actually designates the traditional worldview of Africans, manifesting both the philosophical and practical experiences developed, sustained, and passed on from one generation to the next.

The sustainability of the character and the existence of the African society are located in the traditional component of the nomenclature of the religion. This has been demonstrated in the dynamic evolution of "ancient" thoughts and practices, adapting to succeeding situations borne out of personal and communal experiences of the people, linking forefathers to their descendants. Even though these thoughts and experiences Africans were "born into" have witnessed changes, the essential distinctive elements that make African traditional religion a "living" religion have remained not only unchanged but also universally influential to Africans. These elements are laid out in the salient features of African religions located in an inclusive dynamic of beliefs and practices. These can be compressed under three headings: belief structure, functional components, and religious officials and sacred places.

## Belief Structure

The belief structure of African traditional religion(s) has been presented in diverse forms by different scholars of religion. For example, P.A. Talbot propagated a four-element structure consisting of polytheism, anthropomorphism, animism, and ancestral worship.<sup>6</sup> For E. G. Parrinder, the structural elements are made up of Supreme Being, chief divinities, cult of divinized ancestors, and charms and amulets.<sup>7</sup> However, the most acceptable belief structure of the religion has been the five hierarchical structure advocated by Bolaji Idowu. These are made up of the Supreme Being, divinities, spirits, ancestors, and magic and medicine.<sup>8</sup>

### *(i) Supreme Being*

The belief in the Supreme Being constitutes not just a universal belief among all Africans, but also represents the center and apex of the African religious belief system. Three forms of the dynamics of this belief have been identified among different peoples of Africa. First, there is belief without practical demonstration, such as having a cult of the Supreme Being represented by religious officials and designated locations of worship. The Yoruba people of Nigeria are a model of this kind of belief. Second, there is belief with partial worship. Here, some members of an African tribe may believe without outwardly practicing the religion while another segment of the tribe operates as a cult of worshippers of the Supreme Being. An example of such a tribe is the Ewe of Togo, where it is only in the Abomey community of the tribe that there are altars and religious officials dedicated to the Supreme Being, Plawu. The third form of belief is belief with

practice. The Ashanti of Ghana are a model of this form of practice. According to P. S. Rattray, "It is hardly an exaggeration holding that every compound in Ashanti has an altar for Nyame called Nyame dua (God's tree)."<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the form of the religion and the demonstration of the belief, there is no doubt that against the claim of some scholars, long before the introduction of Christianity and Islam, Africans not only knew and acknowledged the existence of a supreme being, but their religious worldview was built around his being the source of all beings. Through his creative activities, humanity was believed to be inseparably bound together with all other creatures, indebted to this source of all life.<sup>10</sup> This perception is vividly demonstrated in various ways by African religious thoughts and practices. In most cases, the perception is captured in the names and attributes given to the Supreme Being by different African peoples. For example, in West Africa, the Yoruba people of Nigeria have many names for the Supreme Being. The most distinctive ones of these are Olorun, which means "owner of the heavens," and the ritual one Olodumare. Which means "one who owns power and authority."<sup>11</sup> In terms of attributes, the Yoruba describe the Supreme Being as Eleda, meaning the creator; "Oba Mimo" the Holy king; "Oba awon oba," King of kings. In addition, he is the Supreme Being, who is assisted by lesser deities called orisas. These serve as his assistants to look after his creation.<sup>12</sup>

In East Africa, the Akola people of Uganda call the Supreme Being "Bagyendanwa," which means "the source of all things."<sup>13</sup> In Southern Africa, the people of Zimbabwe call the Supreme Being "Musikawanhu," creator of humankind. This affirms that the Supreme Being is the originator of all there is.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the African belief in the Supreme Being must be understood within the context of variations, in emphasizing the local sociological complexions. Thus, while some African groups portray an anthropomorphic image of the Supreme Being, for some it is in masculine terms, some others have adopted the feminine terms; yet for others, there is no specific image.<sup>15</sup>

### *(ii) Divinities*

The belief in divinities stands next in rank to the Supreme Being. Indeed, the influence and sometimes inappropriate devotion to the divinities in African traditional religion have triggered the notion that the religion is polytheistic. However, the authentic African belief about divinities totally falsifies this claim. Africans regard divinities as assistants to the Supreme Being. They are what could be regarded as "ministers" in the "theocratic government" of the Supreme Being. All over Africa, there are three identified categories of divinities. There are the primordial ones, believed to have been with the Supreme Being since the creation of the universe, and to have actually participated in the creative task. For example, the Yoruba people believe that Orisanla has been given the duty of making human bodies before Olodumare puts souls into them.<sup>16</sup>

There is also the category of deified divinities; these are human beings, who after their death were raised to the level of gods. A divinity that belongs to this category in Yoruba belief is Sango, the god of thunder. The third category is made up of divinities associated with natural objects such as rivers, mountains, rocks,

forests, and so on.<sup>17</sup> The nature, number, and formation of the divinities vary from one locality to the other, and they may be either male or female. They also attract different appellations depending on the local language. For example, the Akan of Ghana call them “Bosom” whereas the Yoruba call them “Orisas.” The name for the divinities among the Ewe of Togo is “Tovo” or “Trowo,” whereas the Fon of Sierra Leone refer to them as “Vodu Nudu.”<sup>18</sup>

However, these diverse tendencies in no way diminish the African common and central belief in the nature, importance, and functions of the divinities. By nature, they are not to be compared in rank to the Supreme Being. They are his subordinates, actually created at his pleasure to assist him in specific areas of responsibility. Ultimately, the divinities are regarded as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and humanity. They constitute the channels through which the Africans believe they can successfully approach the Supreme Being.

### *(iii) Spirits*

The Africans are also conscious of the existence of nonhuman beings, which are also divinities by nature, description, and functions. These are known as spirits. The spirits usually make natural phenomenon their abodes. However, they are distinct from the material objects and are not affected by whatever happens to the objects. By nature, the spirits are immaterial beings, though some of them may possess abstract powers through which they may take both human and nonhuman forms, and assume various dimensions at will.<sup>19</sup> Two types of spirits are identified: nature spirits and human spirits. Nature spirits habituate trees, rivers, mountains, and other natural objects. For example, human spirits among the Yoruba are called “Iwin” or “Irunmole.” They could be either benevolent or malevolent.

The malevolent types are associated with the *Abiku* (born to die) syndrome in Yoruba land. The *Abiku* spirits are accredited with the power of removing the fetus inside a pregnant woman and replacing it with one of themselves. This is why pregnant women in traditional Yoruba societies are not allowed to walk about at noon-time and midnight. These are considered the periods when the *Abiku* spirits wander about looking for prey. It is also interesting to note that long-dead ancestors ultimately become spirits, roaming the spirit world, and awaiting the chance of reincarnation through family or tribal descendants. These are generally regarded as benevolent and are actually courted to be born again into the family or community.

### *(iv) Ancestors*

The African belief in ancestors symbolizes and actually gives meaning to the immortality of humans, or life after death. It is a belief that underlines the definition of the African community of comprising both the living and the dead. It also justifies not only the practice of many African tribes burying their dead at home (to be assured of their continuous presence) but also the elaborate funeral ceremonies that are conducted as full burial rites. The full burial rites ensure that the dead are properly sent off, and received in the ancestral community in the other world. It also provides the guarantee for the ancestor to be well disposed to those still alive, and therefore look after their well-being. An inferior burial may incur the anger of the dead ancestor,

and may ensure dire consequences for the living. The calamities resulting from such a situation can only be mitigated after due consultation with traditional diviners and once a proper and satisfactory burial ceremony is re-conducted.

The ancestors are called different names by different peoples of Africa. The Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria call them “Ndichie” and “Baba-nla,” respectively. The Ashanti calls them “Samanto,” while the Ewe calls them “Neshuwe.” Ancestors are called “Vadzium” among the Shona of Zimbabwe. The Zulu address them as “Amadhozi,” while among the Zezuru they are called “Kurova Guva.” The high level of significance enjoyed by the ancestral cult among Africans has led to the erroneous conception that Africans worship their ancestors. This is far from the truth. Ancestors are never objects of worship for Africans. Rather, they perform the functions of guardian spirits and consultants. Their roles are principally to be intermediaries between the living and the spiritual world. Within this context, the ancestors are venerated as a demonstration of respect for elders and forefathers. Because the ancestors exist in the spiritual world, they are regarded as more knowledgeable and not subject to the limitations of time and space. They consequently become protectors of the family. They also symbolize ideal communal existence, acting as agents of social control and communal discipline.

It should be stressed, however, that not all people who die will automatically attain the status of an ancestor. Certain qualifications must be met. These generally include, but are not limited to, dying in ripe old age, dying a good death (not death from suicide and illness such as smallpox, and others considered as moral-sanction induced). In addition, the full burial ceremonies must have been conducted. The individual must have been adjudged morally upright while alive so that he could serve as a character model for the individual, family, or community.

The ancestors are venerated in different forms and at different levels across Africa. They may be venerated by pouring of libation, offerings of food, and through elaborate ceremonies. The veneration may also be performed by individuals, family, or, as happens occasionally, on behalf of a community by religious officials. For example, among the Yoruba, the communal veneration of ancestors is annually observed in different localities in the Egungun (masquerade) festivals. The festivals are a time for visitation of the ancestors called “Ara orun” (visitors from the spiritual world). They masquerade as ancestral spirits visiting the living to bring blessings of prosperity, health, and other social benefits for the continued well-being, order, and peace within their social structure. In some, the central belief of Africans is that life would be of no value without the presence and power of the ancestors.

#### *(v) Magic and Medicine*

The belief in magic and medicine has been sometimes elevated to disproportionate status in African traditional religion. This has largely been due to the visibility of daily practical engagement in their practices by Africans. Most times, the two practices have been taken to be synonymous. For example, the Yoruba call the two phenomena “Oogun,” thereby suggesting that they are one and the same. However, this is not the case in either belief or practice, though they may sometimes overlap as the agencies addressing human life situations. The distinctive natures and

functionalities of magic and medicine are vividly brought out in the definitions that indicate different subject matter, attitude, and approach.<sup>20</sup>

For instance, magic may be defined as:

The act of using the available resources of nature to produce therapeutic needs of man. It is the art of influencing course of events by means of supernatural control of nature and invocation of particular spirit assistance.<sup>21</sup>

Medicine, however, can be generally defined as:

The traditional art and science of the prevention, and cure of diseases. It is the use of natural substances to prevent, treat, and cure diseases. It can also mean medicament used internally or externally.<sup>22</sup>

Magic in African belief can be used to protect or to harm. However, it is widely ascribed to the employment of spiritual powers for evil to harm. Even when it is used for protection, it is generally for the purpose of fighting evil forces. The most widely acknowledged evil forces in Africa are witches (female) and sorcerers (male). These are regarded as wicked human beings who employ their magical powers through witchcraft to intentionally kill people. It is believed that the magical powers of the witches equip them with the ability to fly at night, attend motion meetings, become invisible, and metaphysically consume human flesh and blood even when the victim is still physically alive.

Medicine in African belief is inextricably intertwined with religion. It can also be approached in two forms. The first is the simple notion of medicine. This is the healing system employed to treat minor illnesses, such as headaches, stomachache, and other forms of illnesses, curable through easily available herbs. These can be administered by anybody within the social structure. The second form is complex medicine, which deals with serious illnesses. The illnesses are treated using both physical and metaphysical components. The administration of the "medical process" here is reserved for the professionals as custodians of the traditional healing system. The intertwined relationship between religion and medicine in African belief comes from the notion that illnesses are never seen as just psychological but also spiritual. Thus, the diagnosis, prescription, and treatment must be physical and, more important, metaphysical. Thus, in Yoruba land, for example, the professional medicine man sees his profession in the realm of religion. He performs rituals, invokes spirits, and offers sacrifices for the efficacy and potency of his medicine.<sup>23</sup> The divinity he has to placate to ensure these outcomes is Osanyin. The diagnosing process for the Yoruba medicine man is Ifa divination, through which the cause of the illness is established. The prescription and treatment are shared between performances of necessary sacrifices followed by physical medication.

## Functional Components

The devotees of African traditional religion usually express their religious beliefs in practical terms through dynamics, which are sometimes individualistic, but

mostly communal. The expressions are significantly found in prayers, sacrifices, offerings, and rituals. The media of these are the family or communal festivals and ceremonies celebrated in honor of divinities, harvest periods, and significant landmarks such as birth, marriage, burial rites, and so on. The festivals and ceremonies that are agencies of these activities are manifested in rituals made up of cosmic liturgy and religious language. These manifestations are vividly expressed in music, drumming, dancing, and various forms of arts in drums dressing and other paraphernalia of liturgical celebrations. Both music and art have always had a significant and sustained cultural impact on African traditional religion. These have tremendously represented concrete means of relaying abstract themes of African religious worship. Sounds produced from songs and drumming are regarded as vehicles for articulating abstract ideas in concrete forms. This becomes very relevant in the African dependence on oral and nonoral traditions in the absence of written documents.<sup>24</sup>

For the African, music and religion are seen as a singular enterprise. African religious music is often rendered in a “call and response” format. This is more vividly demonstrated in the rituals of spirit possession, where singing, drumming, and dancing become a trancelike performance, invoking the direct correspondence between the divinities and the people symbolized in the possessed as the messengers of the divinities. Music for Africans and the traditional religions not only gives “live” expression to the beliefs of the people, but more importantly serves as a means of prayer, the language of communication with the divine entities, the divinities, and ultimately through them indirectly to the Supreme Being.

Art—just as music, drumming, and dancing—has always empowered African people in fulfilling various aspects of their religious obligations. For example, according to Robert Thomson, the Yoruba people regard art as avatars of “*ashe*” (divine energy), in ceremonial bowls, stilts, and iron sculptures. These materials are no longer regarded as ordinary works of art, but have been transferred to being sacred, by the conferment of “*ashe*,” the divine force.<sup>25</sup> The undertone of the importance of arts to African religion is discernible in inscriptions found on materials used for religious ceremonies such as drums, headdresses, garments, and paraphernalia of different divinities and their devotees. Most important, African art in different forms, has given credence to the religious content of African historical heritage. Thus, temples or shrines of divinities, images of kings, and royal persons, as well as infrastructures of palaces have largely been represented in religious artifacts. Indeed, historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have relied heavily on these to obtain a meaningful and “factual” depiction of the African people’s diverse ways of life.

## Religious Officials and Sacred Places

Religious officials are central to the practice of African traditional religion. This is because as religious leaders, they constitute the custodians of religious knowledge and practices. Within these contexts, the officials conduct religious rituals, and act as intermediaries between the devotees and the spiritual sphere of the

divinities and Supreme Being. The religious officials can be either male or female, but they are of different kinds. There are those who are cultic officials. These are priests and priestesses who preside over activities at the shrines of the divinities. The Akan and Yoruba peoples have a sizable number of these officials. They are officially responsible for offering sacrifices, and petitioning divinities on behalf of the devotees.

Another category of religious officials is that of diviners. They are also usually of both genders. The main function of diviners is to communicate with the spirit world. This is very important to Africans because it is through such communication that they are in communion with the ancestors, divinities, and ultimately with the Supreme Being. The subject matter of the communication may be for the purpose of determining the cause of problems such as misfortunes, sicknesses, diseases, death, and other forms of calamities, as well as seeking solutions. At other times, it may be for guidance as to the course of action to be undertaken concerning, for example, the future of a newborn baby, a marriage, the building of a house, or the embarking on a journey or trade.

There are different methods of divination in different parts of Africa. Some of these include the case of wooden dice, sea shells, pieces of ivory, palm nuts, and a bowl of water. The most famous method among the Yoruba is Ifa divination, which adopts a very elaborate system of palm nuts usage. The Yoruba Ifa diviners are usually priests and priestesses of Orunmila, the Yoruba divinity of knowledge and wisdom.

One other category of traditional religious officials, and perhaps considered to be the most powerful, are the spirit mediums. These are people through whom the spirits of ancestors communicate with their descendants. Most spirit mediums are females, and they may be associated with family, tribe, or territory. Through them, Africans, at the individual, family, or communal level, discern the will of the ancestors and obtain explanations for all situations affecting them, either for good or evil. The mediums also provide solutions to problems and steps to be taken to preserve good fortunes.

Due to their office and traditional functions they perform, kings are also regarded as religious leaders. For example, the kings as community heads are responsible for the consultation of community spirits. They are also responsible for ensuring that all religious functions and observances, such as festivals, are carried out by various religious officers. Indeed for the Yoruba, the king called "Oba" is referred to as "Alase ekeji orisa"—second in command to the deity—from whom he derives his authority. Consequently, his authority is not just political but divine in source and sustenance. The Oba is therefore regarded as not only the number one religious official, but he also must partake in devotions to all divinities of his community.

Sacred places are central and vital to the practical expression and functions of religious leaders in African traditional religion. Perhaps the most prominent of these are the shrines, where the divinities may be located in family compounds or places communally dedicated to the divinities. The Ashanti of Ghana, for instance, have a familial sacred place for the Supreme Being—Nyame. This is usually in the form of a forked branch cut from a certain tree, called "Nyame dua." The Zulus of South

Africa have elevated portions of a hut called “Umsamu.” This is where ancestor-related rituals are conducted. In addition, mountains, rivers, forest groves, and caves are regarded as sacred based on the notion of their being inhabited by spirits, divinities, or even the Supreme Being. These usually serve as venues of prayers, where religious officials visit. For example, in Zimbabwe, there are several such sacred places, which have become venues of prayers, particularly for petitions for rains in times of drought.

Sacred places, particularly the shrines, are very important as sources of information for African religion because they provide traditional nonoral knowledge and understanding of the African people and their religion. Artifacts of various instruments used in worship have provided archaeologists with valuable insights into not only the religious, but also the social, political, and overall cultural history as well as the worldviews of Africans.

In summary, before the advent and influence of Christianity and Islam, and particularly in precolonial Africa, the beliefs and the practices of African indigenous religion were firmly rooted in the cosmological and cosmogenial worldviews in a number of fundamental, philosophical, and theological concepts. These were based on the African people’s observation of the world around them, and consequent reflections on its existence and workings. To begin with, Africans believed that the world was created and that it was created by the Supreme Being. Different myths, from different parts of Africa, portrayed diverse methods and processes through which the world came into existence. Though there may not be uniformity on these, there is the universality of looking at the world from the religious perspective and explaining it theoretically.

Africans also believe in the duality of the universe as comprising the visible (the earth) and the invisible (the heavens). However, the two are linked through the religious activities of humans linking the world to the Supreme Being. The origin, distribution, and subsequent reinstatement of this link through close relationships with the Supreme Being are narrated in many creation stories. The stories also indicate that though the universe is created, it has assumed an unending existence in terms of space and time.

Also, central to African cosmological thoughts, is the belief in the order in the universe. This order, which is inclusively morally and religiously based, depicts a mystical order responsible for governing the universe. The attempts to relate and sometimes control this order have resulted in practices such as medicine, magic, witchcraft, and other religious activities discussed earlier. The general belief is that, though the divinities and other spiritual beings may exercise mystical power, the ultimate source of the power is the Supreme Being.

Perhaps the most important cosmological belief of the African peoples is that man is the center of the universe. Indeed, the whole world is seen as existing for his sake.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the world and all in it must function for the ultimate benefit of man. This may account for ascribing sacredness to even physical and natural objects in the universe. Consequently, man considers it necessary to live in harmony with nature. Though he realizes that he is not the master, but rather the beneficiary end-user, he has the obligation to preserve it and use it wisely. This is the only way that his survival can be guaranteed.<sup>27</sup>

## Contemporary Status of African Traditional Religion

Over the centuries, African traditional religion has faced many challenges that have significantly diminished the practice and influence of the religion on the continent. These challenges are found in what could be termed internal and external factors. The internal factors, associated with the location and internal workings of the religion, have acted as barriers to its development in consonance with evolving developmental realities. External challenges arose and are still arising from the continent's contacts with the outside world, principally the Western influence through the slave trade, colonialism, and missionary activities.

The internal challenges are mainly derived from factors such as geographical expansiveness of the continent, which makes uniformity of beliefs and practices in the religion impossible. This obvious diversity has been unfortunately employed to insinuate, or even assert, that Africans have practiced different or tribal religions. Another internal factor militating against the religion is the lack of written documents in the form of a scripture as available in other religious traditions. In depending exclusively on oral sources, its claims have been usually dismissed as products of superstitious and "unintelligible" stipulations. One other internal factor, which is directly linked with lack of written documents, is the secret nature of the religion. Religious officials of different categories in African traditional religion often, for various reasons, keep to themselves vital information and knowledge pertaining to the contents, processes, and methods of the beliefs and practices of the religion. Coupled with a nonwritten tradition, these pieces of information and knowledge die with the officials and are therefore lost to present and future generations.

The external challenges faced by African traditional religion in terms of Africa's contact with the outside world substantially began with the transatlantic slave trade when significant numbers of its adherents were transported across the ocean—many of them never to return, and the few who returned after the trade, converted to other religions. This challenge was compounded by the two-dimensional and competitive evangelical "invasions" of Christianity and Islam. The propagations of the two religions have been so effective that the African continent is today split almost down the line by both religious traditions. Finally, the colonial impact became a major challenge to African traditional religion. In collaboration with the Christian missionaries, Western education and civilization were introduced. The combination of these two phenomena created an "elitist" consciousness in the followers of religions in the continent. Those who practice Christianity and Islam regard themselves as civilized and educated, while those who practice the traditional religion are regarded as largely illiterate and uncivilized.

Having said the above, it should, however, be pointed out that in spite of these challenges, African traditional religion still has a future in global religious space. This position is evidenced by a number of factors that have emerged, and are contemporarily emerging. Principal among these factors are first, the increased attention in studies and scholarships being paid to African traditional religion, not only in Africa but also all over the world. Courses in the religion are being offered in both public and private higher education institutions in all parts of the world. Numerous

books have been, and are being written, on the religion. Also, conferences, symposia, and other forms of scholarly meetings deliberate on themes based on the religion.

Second, many African nations are beginning to show significant commitment to the spirit and letter of nationalism in the search for African self-identity. African traditional religion as the centerpiece and sustainer of African culture is being directly or indirectly promoted to meet this objective. Third, even with the almost total conversion of Africans to Christianity and Islam, the traditional practices of the African people continue to be relevant and observed as cultural values in their everyday engagements. Again, African traditional religion is mirrored as a basic component of the values. Fourth, through the process of acculturation, enculturation, and so on, African traditional religious values have become part and parcel of the practices of both Christianity and Islam on the African continent to the extent that the practices of these religions in Africa today are not in the original form in which they were introduced into the continent. As a result of the factors enumerated above, African traditional religion has become visible as a competitive religion in African and global religious spaces.

## Christian Religious Tradition in Africa

As a religious tradition, it has been generally accepted that Christianity grew out of Judaism. This is evidenced and established by many studies and literatures. Foremost among these is the three-volume study of the Bible by Wilfred J. Harrington. The volume is titled *The Record of Revelation: The Bible; The Record of Promise: The Old Testament; The Record of the Fulfillment: The New Testament*.<sup>28</sup> Within this context, Christianity, right from its inception, has regarded itself as the direct succession of the Old Testament tradition. This claim has been vividly demonstrated in first, the origin of its name and second, the historical and theological configurations of its founder, Jesus Christ.

The word “Christ,” from which Christianity is derived, comes from the Greek word “Christos.” This is equivalent to the Hebrew word “Mashiah,” which, when translated to English, is “Messiah.” The etymological meaning of the word in the three languages is “the anointed one.” It denotes someone who is given a specific mandate of undertaking a national responsibility. Second, the name Christian was first used in Antioch to describe the followers of Christ through the observation of their behaviors.

Jesus, the founder of Christianity, historically lived in Galilee in Palestine in the early first century BCE. Facts about his birth and mission come almost exclusively from the Christian Bible—the New Testament. His birth is claimed to be a miraculous one, since he is believed to have been conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He is, however, regarded as a descendant of David through lineage with Joseph his foster father to whom his mother, Mary, was betrothed. The mission of Christ, which became the foundation of Christianity, lasted about three years. During this period, Jesus traveled throughout Judea. He chose twelve men, who became his apostles. In their company, he preached about the kingdom of God.

The kingdom was distinguished from an earthly one. Though it was a Messianic kingdom foretold by the prophets, it was a heavenly one, contrary to the expectation of the Jewish people. The central message of Christ was that in this heavenly kingdom—salvation is spiritual rather than physical or political. The members would worship God as heavenly king. The worship would be spiritual in nature. The members would live by the truth and have brotherly love toward one another. Jesus, in words and actions, presented himself as the expected Messiah foretold by the prophets. His principal mission was to save the world and establish the heavenly kingdom. He was credited with many miracles—mighty works—to give credence to his messianic power. Ironically, it was the messianic claim of Jesus—the Son of God—that got him into trouble with the official Jewish establishment and eventually had him delivered to the Roman authorities and executed.

Apart from his disciples and retinues of other followers, Jesus had no organized group as such. In addition, he did not write anything down. However, his preaching and activities became perpetuated in the New Testament consisting of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles. It is instructive that the violent death of Jesus on the cross was initially disappointing to his disciples; however, his resurrection, reappearance, and ascension reassured them of his power and truth of his promises. Finally, the events of the Pentecost—through which the apostles experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit as promised by Christ—not only emboldened them but also and more significantly “officially” constituted the first winning of souls to the movement later to be called the “Christian tradition.”

## The Christian Tradition

Though the mainstream doctrines of Christianity are located in the Apostles’ Creed, the various interpretations they have witnessed have created controversies that have resulted in heresies and eventual schisms.<sup>29</sup> In spite of this situation, which has led to denominations in Christianity, the central doctrines as theological foundations of the Christian faith have remained, with the Christian Bible as the point of reference. Based on the Apostles’ Creed and the scriptures, the Christian faith is presented in a number of beliefs and practices. As indicated earlier, the splitting of Christianity into denominations makes a comprehensive or universal Christian worldview very difficult, if at all achievable, and definitely not within the context and space of a single chapter. In spite of the obvious denominational challenges of the Christian faith, there are some basic beliefs and practices universally common to all Christians. These beliefs and practices are stated in the “official Christian” Apostles’ Creed. They mainly consist of belief in one God, belief in the Holy Trinity, belief in Jesus, belief in the church as the kingdom of God on Earth, the concept of man, concept of worship, and concept of eschatology.

### History and Influence in Africa

As a religious tradition, Christianity became part of Africa from the first century CE. There is no doubt, as noted earlier, that Christianity had to wait until the late

1800s and early 1900s to become fully established as one of the two most practiced religions on the continent. From its introduction in the first century to the present period, Christianity has undergone different fortunes in African history. Nevertheless, its presence, importance, and influence have always been felt significantly within African religious space. The presence and influences of Christianity in Africa historically may be divided into three main segments. The first comprises the earliest contacts in North Africa. The second spans the precolonial and colonial periods consisting of Portuguese traders, and later Christian missionaries' efforts with the support of the colonial governments. The third includes the postcolonial and contemporary period. Within these contexts, this chapter attempts to explore the Christian religion from the perspectives of its advent, development in different regions, the leaders with their expansion methods, their worldviews as represented by doctrinal peculiarities and artistic influences, as well as the contemporary facets of the religion.

## Christianity in North Africa, Ethiopia—Early Contacts in Africa

In symbolic terms, Christianity may be said to have been in early contact with Africa in two ways. The first, according to the biblical narrative, was the taking of the child Jesus to Egypt in order to avoid his being killed by King Herod. The second was the possibility of the infiltration of the message of Jesus into North Africa, which at the time was part of the Roman Empire, just as was Palestine, where Jesus carried out his ministry. However, historically as an organized religion, Christianity came to Egypt in the first century CE. This is believed to have occurred simultaneously as Christianity was making its way into Northern Europe. According to the church historian Eusebius, the Christian church in Egypt was founded by Saint Mark, the writer of the fourth Gospel. The location was in Alexandria. From Alexandria, Christianity spread to other parts of Egypt. Indeed, by the end of the first century, the religion had penetrated into even the rural parts of Egypt and had actually become the religion of the majority of the people. As Noel King points out, the strong presence of Christianity in Egypt in the early history of the church is indicated in the fact that apart from Rome, it is only Egypt that has one of the oldest churches and also longevity of tradition and continuity in the same locality.<sup>30</sup> Also, the city of Alexandria became an outstanding theological center, producing figures such as Origen, Cyprian, Clement, and others who influenced the church for all time through their theological writings. The spread and vibrancy of Christianity in Egypt continued until the seventh century when it was conquered by the Muslims. Even then, Christianity was still practiced as a minority religion.

Other parts of North Africa that had early contact with the Christian faith are modern-day countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. They were known as Roman Africa, during the period of the Roman Empire. The area had a very strong following of Christians in the early second century. The area produced influential theologians of early Christendom. These included Tertullian, who first