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I.7 African Traditional Religion (ATR): A Model in the Study of African Religions

1 Introduction

Students of African religions are familiar with the conundrum of finding the right words to refer to the object of their study. If they have been educated at more than one institution, they will have developed the ability to identify the topic of their interest in the course catalog, even though it rarely comes under a standard title. Courses they take will be listed as 'African Traditional Religion,' 'African Religions,' 'African Indigenous Religions,' or 'Traditional African Religions,' to name just a few. These titles may sound different, but they will cover similar themes. Scholars in the field face comparable challenges because there is no standard term to outline their area of study. A crucial task is to make sense of the existing labels, to understand the information they convey about their object of study, and to capture the differences between them. This exercise, which involves accounting for the historical developments that give rise to the terms in question, is also relevant to the history of our discipline, especially on a global scale (Hermann in this volume).

One way to bring more clarity to the discussion is to differentiate the existing terms and the discourses associated with them. In what follows, I will focus on one of the most established terms in the study of African religions – **African Traditional Religion** (hereafter ATR) – by introducing its history and content. ATR is often used in both academic and non-academic circles to describe the unity of over two thousand 'traditional religions' found on the African continent and to represent them as one overarching religion for all Africans, united by the idea of one common God and basic moral principles, and comparable to other 'world religions.'[1] The ATR model is known for minimizing the ritual, performance, and social elements of African religions and overemphasizing beliefs (Olupona 1996, 198). It originated in the literature produced by African scholars in Anglophone Africa in the 1960s, but has since become widespread in the English-language

1 The term refers to the established, if outdated, paradigm in the study of religion of grouping religions that are said to be of global significance into a single category of 'world religions.' See Alberts and Laack, both in this volume.

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scholarship on African religions, which is the focus of this article.[2] Because of its prevalence in both scholarly literature and public discourse, ATR is often confused with the general descriptive category of 'traditional religions of Africa,' which is intended as a neutral reference for the multiplicity of **indigenous religions** on the African continent. There is no consensus on how to label this broader category of African religions. While I prefer the term 'traditional religions of Africa,' other equally established terms are 'African indigenous religions' and 'African religions.' Even if the adjective 'traditional' has been criticized for suggesting outdatedness, immutability, and geographical confinement, a similar criticism can be leveled against the other common signifier 'indigenous,' yet 'traditional' has richer history in the Anglophone African context and is established in everyday use.

The goal of this article is not to criticize the ATR model, but rather to identify its contours and distinguish it from other concepts, particularly from the more neutral designation for the multiplicity of traditional religions on the continent. For students just beginning to learn about African religions, such a differentiation will reveal the contestations, nuances, and discourses associated with popular and scholarly conceptions of African religions and the historical circumstances in which they have emerged.

2 What is the History of the Study of African Religions?

In order to disentangle the various understandings of African religions that scholars and students have to navigate today, it is crucial to consider the history of the study of religion in Africa. Some authors divide this history into three broad periods (Ray 1976; Chidester 1996): the frontier stage, the colonial stage, and the postcolonial stage. The frontier stage, which marks the period of active encounter between Africans and Europeans, was characterized by an outright rejection of the capacity of Africans to comprehend God. The colonial stage, from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, overlapped with the establishment of anthropology and the study of religion as academic disciplines, and the subsequent recognition that religions could indeed be found in Africa, albeit in their elemental form.

2 See Wilkens and Goshadze 2023 for a general overview of African religions and references to Francophone contexts. There is no equivalent to ATR in the German language since, as noted, this is a term that is typical of anglophone contexts. As in English-language literature, the German terms used to refer to traditional religions of Africa are not standardized and vary between *Afrikanische Religionen, traditionelle/traditionale afrikanische Religionen, indigene* or *lokale Religionen in Afrika.*

Against the backdrop of the post-independence spirit of liberation and the resolve to put African countries on the map as active players, the third phase was characterized by the determination to demonstrate that African religions were indeed worthy of the status of 'world religions.'

Alternatively, Jan Platvoet proposed to divide the discipline into "Africa as object," when religions of Africa were studied by outside observers, and "Africa as subject," when they began to be studied by African scholars (Platvoet 1996; Danfulani 2012). The "Africa as subject" phase, in turn, consists of three categories – the study of religions of Africa by 1) African anthropologists, 2) African Christian scholars in religious studies departments, and 3) African historians. Based on these classifications, ATR is the product of the post-independence study of African religions by African scholars with a strong Christian interest who were employed in religious studies departments throughout Anglophone Africa between the 1960s and the 1980s. Since its emergence, however, the ATR model has been adopted by both African and non-African scholars, and it continues to coexist with other conceptualizations of African religions, such as anthropological and historical works that focus on individual communities and their religious practices.

3 What is ATR?

The earliest intentional use of the term African Traditional Religion can be traced back to the 1954 monograph, *African Traditional Religion*, by the British scholar of comparative religion, Geoffrey Parrinder. However, Parrinder used the term loosely, simply to refer to the old beliefs of African peoples, as opposed to their contemporary beliefs, by which he meant Christianity and Islam. It was only in the works of African scholars of religion that the term took on a new meaning. To give the reader a sense of the ATR model, I break it down into key components and provide examples from the works of prominent ATR scholars. In reading these, one will notice the echoes of Christian theological assumptions, which is not surprising given that the model was primarily formulated by African **liberal Christian theologians** active in religious studies departments of Anglophone Africa. The reader should keep in mind that not all of the components listed are represented in the works of the authors who advanced the ATR model, but they all constitute a recognizable dimension of the discourse.

In order to avoid referring to multiple authors from different national contexts with which undergraduate students may not be familiar, I will limit the examples below to three Nigerian scholars whose works clearly represent the

ATR model. Bolaji Idowu (1913–1993) is by far one of the best-known architects of ATR, whose *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (1973) inaugurated ATR as a unifying concept. Trained as a theologian in Nigeria and the United Kingdom, Idowu served as professor and head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan from 1958 until his retirement in 1976; he was also a prominent leader in the Methodist Church of Nigeria. His successor at the University of Ibadan, Joseph Omosade Awolalu (1929–unknown), is the second author whose work I cite. Educated in Accra, New York, and London, Awolalu wrote extensively on ATR and contributed significantly to the **reification** of the category. Finally, Emefie Ikenga-Metuh (died 2000), a professor of African Traditional Religion[3] at the University of Jos in Nigeria, was another important figure in shaping the ATR model. All three of these scholars have written about ATR in general, as well as about specific religious traditions in Nigeria through the lens of ATR – Idowu and Awolalu researched Yoruba religion, and Ikenga-Metuh studied Igbo religion.

Here are the five main components of the ATR model:

(1) *The unification of all African religions into a single category shared by all Africans and often described as a 'world religion.'* Joseph O. Awolalu argues that African religion must be referred to in the singular because

> there are many basic similarities in the religious systems – everywhere there is the concept of God (called by different names); there is also the concept of divinities and/or spirits as well as beliefs in the ancestral cult. Every locality may and does have its own local deities, [...] its own name or names for the Supreme Being, but in essence the pattern is the same. There is that noticeable 'Africanness' in the whole pattern. (1976b, 53)

According to Bolaji Idowu, it is the common concept of God that makes it possible to "speak of the religion of Africa in the singular" (1973, 104).

The singular reference to African religion contrasts with historical and anthropological approaches, which emphasize the **plurality** of African religions and the need to study them as entities unique in themselves, with individual characteristics that emerge from the particular circumstances in which they thrive.

(2) *The centrality of a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent supreme God who, despite the differences in regional expressions, is ultimately the same not only for all Africans, but also for all adherents of so-called* ***Abrahamic religions***. "The big truth that the whole world still has to learn," writes Idowu, "is that there is only

3 As this title suggests, in some African universities 'African Traditional Religion' has been adopted in the designation of chairs and programs of study, which speaks to its ubiquity. The University of Jos (Nigeria) also offers degrees in African Traditional Religion.

one God, and not many; the god is not a monopoly of any particular race or nation" (Idowu 1963, 9). This God is creator of everything, is omnipotent, **transcendent**, omniscient, just, and benevolent (Ikenga-Metuh 1981, 16, 33–45). The ultimacy accorded to God differs from the observation of non-ATR scholars that the importance and centrality of the Supreme Being is not universal to Africa, and that there are communities that do not find the Supreme God relevant to their daily lives. The ATR tendency to "activate God," to use David Westerlund's (1985, 32) formulation, can also be seen in the context of the general concern of ATR scholars to decolonize the study of African religions, especially in light of the fact that most of the scholarship prior to the ATR model was produced by either missionaries or colonial anthropologists (Shaw 1990). From this perspective, the insistence on the supremacy of God is a counter-argument to the widespread Protestant missionary idea in Anglophone Africa that the God of Africans is either withdrawn (*deus otiosus*)[4] or irrelevant to their daily lives.

(3) *The peripherality of deities and ancestors.* This is most evident in the pronouncement of ATR as monotheistic rather than as polytheistic or henotheistic[5]. In the ATR model, deities and ancestors appear as derivatives of God and/or as intermediaries between God and humans (Awolalu 1976b, 60). This complex arrangement between the deities and the Supreme God is captured in terms of "**diffused monotheism**" (Idowu 1973, 171) or "modified monotheism" (Awolalu 1976b, 61). Idowu formulates this approach succinctly in the following quotation:

> African traditional religion cannot be described as polytheistic. Its appropriate description is monotheistic, however modified this may be. The modification is, however, inevitable because of the presence of other divine beings within the structure of the religion. But 'beings' in their case can only be spelt with the initial small letter 'b'; 'power', when they are so described, can only be spelt with the initial small letter 'p'; this is because, in fact, they have no absolute existence and the African world is under a unitary theocratic government (1973, 168).

(4) *The belief that there is a (better) life after death, similar to the Christian idea of paradise.* While not all ATR authors emphasize the afterlife, the majority speak of a special place where the deceased go after death.[6] Bolaji E. Idowu, for instance,

4 *Deus otiosus* refers to the idea of a Creator God who withdraws from the human world after the creation of the universe.

5 Henotheism refers to the practice of favoring one supreme deity over others in a pluralistic theology that acknowledges the existence of other deities.

6 Of the three authors discussed here, Ikenga-Metuh is an exception because he argues that due to the life-affirming orientation of Igbo religion, reincarnation as an ancestor is the most desired state after death; see Ikenga-Metuh 1985, 106–107.

speaks of the Yoruba "abode of the Deity," "heaven," or "paradise." This stands in contrast with historical and anthropological studies of individual traditional religions, which often find a relative lack of emphasis on what happens after death.

(5) *The understanding of humans as moral agents guided by God.* In his study of Igbo religion, Ikenga-Metuh asserts that morality is part of the order created by God. In this frame of reference, God endows humans with "the voice of conscience" (Ikenga-Metuh 1981, 115), which gives them "the ability to distinguish right from wrong" (Awolalu 1976a, 275), but when evil is done, punishment always follows (Ikenga-Metuh 1973, 4). The interpretation of the moral order as the fruit of religion clearly reveals Judeo-Christian influences on ATR. **Postcolonial** historical and anthropological studies tend to suggest a greater historical and geographical variation in the concern with right and wrong in individual African religions.

Most of the literature produced on African religions in the contemporary context combines the ATR model with other lenses. While it is easier to avoid sweeping claims about any single African religion in focused ethnographic studies of particular communities, it is difficult to keep away from the widespread ATR model when the subject is approached through a general or comparative lens.

4 How Was ATR Formed?

The ATR model has been sharply criticized, most notably by the Ugandan scholar Okot p'Bitek, for seeking to validate the civility of Africans by dressing up "African deities with Hellenic robes" and parading them before the Western world (p'Bitek 1971, 41). The insistence on the civility of ATR, p'Bitek argued, is simply a restatement of the familiar **myth** of the primitive. While it is important to keep this critique in mind, what it fails to recognize is that ATR is a product of its time; as such, it reflects the historical developments on the continent and the active attempts by African scholars to make sense of them. In the words of Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum, ATR represents a counter-invention to the European invention of Africa as "primitive, savage, without religion, pagan, superstitious, full of witchcraft, witch hunts, sorcery and black magic" (2003, 135). While it is impossible to address all the historical junctures that gave rise to ATR, I would like to briefly consider the three major influences on the model: missionary discourses on African religions, Pan-Africanism, and nation-building.

Missionaries of liberal theological persuasion active in Anglophone Africa in the early twentieth century were particularly important in disseminating theolo-

gical ideas that would find their way into the ATR concept.[7] Most notable for our purposes are theological ideas such as *logoi spermatikoi* ('pagan' religions as 'seed words' for Christianity), *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the gospel), and continuity between 'pagan' and 'true' religions that would be eagerly embraced by ATR autors. It was these missionaries who laid the groundwork for the Judeo-Christian interpretation of traditional religions of Africa that would become the primary feature of the ATR model. Some have argued that the model clearly reiterates some of the ideals of liberal Protestantism, namely the apparent discursive preference for philosophical and intellectualist interpretation of the divine at the expense goal-oriented ritual practice (p'Bitek 1971; Horton 1984). Such emphasis on the similarities between ATR and Christianity, in turn, served as the basis for the theological argument that the former would facilitate the eventual spread of Christianity on the continent (Chitando 2005; Bediako 1996).

The second undeniable influence on ATR is Pan-Africanism, the notion that there are cultural and ideological commonalities among the peoples of African descent. Pan-Africanism manifested itself as a mixture of literary, historical, political, and cultural movements in the Black Atlantic[8] in the late nineteenth century and became a major intellectual force behind the anti-colonial self-determination movements in twentieth century Africa. Notable Pan-Africanists from the continent include Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Léopold Senghor of Senegal, and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya. Educated abroad and active in the intellectual networks of the Black Atlantic, these leaders advocated the overthrow of European colonial rule and the economic and political unification of Africa. Along with Negritude, a cultural movement led by French-speaking African and Caribbean intellectuals based in Paris, Pan-Africanism was influenced by African American ideological currents, including the Harlem Renaissance, and called for a reclaiming of pride in African(-American) identity. The claim that despite diverse religious expressions on the continent, one can recognize "the African kernel" of thought and expression typical of the ATR model echoes some of the Pan-Africanist ideas about the commonality of all African peoples in terms of **race**, customs, and culture (Magesa 1997, 27).

Pan-Africanism overlapped with national independence movements on the continent and shared with them a commitment to re-establish African culture and civilization as worthy of a respectable place in the world. A key dimension of this new vision of Africanness was a rethinking of African religion as the spiritual core of the African people. These broader postcolonial goals resonated in the newly es-

7 For example, Junod [1919] 1927, Willoughby 1928, Smith 1927.

8 Introduced by Paul Gilroy 1993, this term emphasizes the cultural interconnectedness of the Americas, Africa, the Caribbean, and Britain based on a shared transoceanic experience tied to the slave trade and the subsequent formation of a transatlantic culture.

tablished African universities, where scholars of religion eagerly took up the task of devising models of African religion to which newly minted state leaders could appeal. The interplay of these scholarly, political, and popular considerations provided the foundation for the introduction of ATR, a unified category of religion for all of Africa that could also function as a 'world religion.' The ATR model was a great success among postcolonial African university students and youth since it provided "a new identity construct" (Platvoet and van Rinsum 2003, 131).

5 Why Should ATR Be Discussed as a Separate Category?

The emergence of ATR as a category has received little systematic attention. In most cases, the subject has been treated as part of general histories of the study of African religions, or in article-length critiques of ATR as a product of the Judeo-Christian tradition.[9] This article defined and historicized ATR as a model that is distinct from, though united under, the broader category of traditional religions of Africa. Such a distinction is necessary to avoid the interchangeable use of ATR with such labels as African religions, indigenous and/or traditional religions of Africa, which contributes to historical and conceptual inaccuracies.

Recognizing ATR as a historical category allows students to see its impact on the self-representations, beliefs, and practices of the practitioners of African religions, and to recognize it as an outcome of the active engagement of post-independence African scholars with Pan-African, nationalist, missionary, and modernist discourses. More generally, understanding the roots and significance of the ATR discourse is crucial to making sense of the state of African religions today, both inside and outside of academia. After all, ATR remains the dominant model not only in the study of African religions by African and foreign scholars, but also in the way African religions are conceptualized in the public sphere – in political discourse, the educational system, cultural policies, and so on. The broader influence of ATR as a category has been most evident in the reframing of traditional religions in terms of Africa's 'spiritual' heritage in the course of Pan-Africanism, and even more so in the philosophies of identity that provided the ideological scaffolding for nationalist movements leading up to independence in the second half of the twentieth century.

9 For general histories of the subject, see Platvoet 1996, Platvoet and van Rinsum 2003, and Westerlund 1985; for critical approaches to ATR see Horton 1984 and Shaw 1990.

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