Reassessing African Religion: Misconceptions, Marginalization, and the Impact of Western Thought

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Abstract: This paper examines the nature of African religion and the influence of Western misconceptions on its development and perception. Historically, African religion has functioned as a benchmark for the values, principles, and philosophies that shape the daily lives and ethical frameworks of African societies. It encompasses a unique belief system, reverence for a Supreme Being, and a profound connection to community and nature, among other qualities. However, the advent of Western institutional religion significantly altered this dynamic. Western thought often dismissed African religious practices as fetishistic, primitive, or inhumane, thereby marginalizing these traditions and replacing them with Western Christian practices. As a result, this influence alienated and marginalized African peoples from their indigenous religions, altering their identities. Ironically, Western practices promoted values and principles similar to those inherent in African philosophy, but classified them as superior to facilitate control over Africans. This paper critically examines such narratives, highlighting the authenticity, richness, and sanctity of African religion. By exposing the original nature of African religion and employing conceptual and critical analysis, the paper argues that African religion, far from being fetishistic, embodies the totality of African reality; it is a sophisticated system of moral principles, belief, spirituality, and deep connection to the world.

Introduction:

From time immemorial, African religion has served as the foundation for value systems, principles, and philosophies that guide and inform the daily lives and ethical frameworks of African societies. It is not merely a belief system but rather an embodiment of a profound worldview that affirms faith in a Supreme Being, cultural practices, traditions, rituals, festivals, belief in divinities and ancestors, a hierarchical arrangement of existence, and a deep relationship with community and nature, among many other elements (Akande, 2013: 140). Over the years, these religious practices have shaped how Africans perceive and interact with reality. The belief in a Supreme Being is rooted in observations of nature and the forces behind it, rather than being based on the power of any mortal (Akande, 2013: 140). Given the structure and regularity inherent in nature, Africans believe that a Supreme Being controls all affairs, a conviction that has historically guided their actions, behaviors, and societal evolution.

According to Akande (2013: 142), using the Yoruba as an example, multiple divinities assist God in His affairs. Orunmila, the god of divination and knowledge, is consulted by devotees seeking guidance on existential matters. Ogun, the god of iron, is revered by those whose livelihoods depend on machinery, who seek his favor for success in their endeavors. These examples illustrate that African religious practices encompass more than belief in a Supreme Being; they also embody a complex system of moral principles, spirituality, and deep connection to the world. However, the advent of colonialism and subsequent globalization brought Western culture, influence, and religion into contact with African traditions. This encounter eroded the existing status quo and, as a result, led to the

dismissal of African religious practices as fetishistic, resulting in their marginalization and replacement by Western Christian practices. Accordingly, this paper explores the nature of African religion and the impact of Western influence, with the aim of critically examining prevailing narratives and highlighting the authenticity, richness, and sanctity of African religion.

To achieve its objectives, the paper is divided into four sections, excluding the introduction. The first section conceptualizes religion, examining perspectives that see religion as inherently tied to God as well as those that argue for godless religions. The second section explores the nature of African traditional religion, emphasizing how it informs daily activities, shapes reality, and influences worldview. The third section investigates the impact of Western realities on African religion, analyzing how external forces have affected traditional practices. The fourth and final section offers a conclusion, reflecting on the arguments and positions presented and emphasizing that African religion is far from the misconceptions often associated with it. This paper argues that, contrary to being viewed as fetishistic, African religion embodies the totality of African reality: a sophisticated system of moral principles, belief, spirituality, and deep connection to the world. In other words, it highlights the authenticity and richness of African religion, far removed from the negative attributes ascribed by Western powers.

Conceptualizing Religion

Religion remains one of the fundamental forces shaping the lives and worldviews of many Africans today. It plays a crucial role in determining individual and collective identities, as well as influencing social behaviors and responses (Sanni, 2016: 1). In essence,

religion forms a significant part of the identity of many people, especially within African societies. As Akande (2013: 140) notes, nearly every continent harbors some form of religious belief, most of which are intimately connected to cultural perspectives on life and the universe. Traditionally, religion is associated with the belief in a Supreme Being—an entity whose power surpasses that of humans and is understood to be beyond the reach of ordinary sensory perception (Murwa, Kante, & Kibor, 2018). This entity, commonly referred to as 'God,' is often regarded as sovereign over all other beings, though conceptions of God vary across cultural, philosophical, and theological contexts.

Émile Durkheim (1912) defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things—things set apart and forbidden—viewing religion through the lens of moral embodiment and obligation. Toft (2011: 115) similarly describes religion as the "belief in supernatural being or beings." This view emphasizes belief in a transcendent reality, the distinction between the sacred and the profane, and a moral code that governs a community sharing a common worldview (see Sanni, 2016: 3). Paul Tillich (1957) further conceptualizes religion as the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern—a concern that qualifies all others as preliminary and provides an answer to the question of life's meaning.

These diverse perspectives affirm that 'religion' has been understood in various ways, influenced by the multitude of religious practices, perceptions, and lived experiences across the globe. For example, Bonsu (2018: 109) references William James (1902), who saw religion as encompassing the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in their solitude. Although these definitions differ, they share core

similarities that allow for the categorization of diverse phenomena under the umbrella of religion.

According to Harrison (2006), scholarly definitions suggest that the essence of religion lies in adherence to certain principles or rules, implying that whatever is classified as religion involves belief in guiding norms that shape actions and relationships. From this, it is clear that religion extends beyond belief in physical objects or deities alone. As Akande (2013: 140) observes, not all religious beliefs are tied to the idea of a supreme being; Confucianism, Buddhism, Marxism, and even Humanism have been labeled as "godless religions." Thus, religion can be understood as a set of enduring principles and rules that guide, inform, and determine the actions of believers and their relationships with others, both within and outside their belief system.

Having established a working understanding of religion, the next section will explore the nature of African traditional religion, as required by the aims of this paper.

The nature of African Traditional Religion

Awolalu (1976: 1) identifies religion as the bedrock of African society, asserting its fundamental and pervasive influence on the lives of African people. Despite its significance, the principles of African traditional religion are frequently misunderstood and misrepresented by outsiders. This section examines African traditional religion as the indigenous system of beliefs and practices unique to the continent. It embodies the faith sustained by ancestors and, although impacted by external forces, continues to be practiced—sometimes in modified forms—across various African communities.

As the foundation of African life, African traditional religion informs daily activities and shapes multiple dimensions of

existence. It is integral to African identity (Sanni, 2016: 1), spirituality, and the veneration of specific gods and divinities (Akande, 2013: 140; Mokhoathi, 2016: 2). Furthermore, it reflects harmonious relations with the environment (Taringa, 2006), influences the ethical treatment of animals (Akande, 2024: 122–3), and underpins the formation of cultural belief systems (Awolalu, 1976: 1). In other words, African traditional religion extends beyond worship and spirituality to encompass the totality of African life and modes of engaging with reality.

Fuller (2002) emphasizes that African traditional religion is not limited to cultural norms or formal worship but represents the essence of existence itself. Its scope includes conceptions of God, the hierarchical relationship between the divine and humanity, the roles of divinities and spirits, the significance of ancestors, chieftaincy systems, and

mystical powers. In essence, it addresses the totality of being. Toft (2011: 115) equates African traditional religion with indigenous religion, describing it as the collective practices and worldviews of African peoples. He notes that religion serves as a convergent point for multiple perspectives, all guided by religious principles—ranging from societal organization and leadership to divine communication and communal ethics.

Mokhoathi (2016: 1–2) points out that African traditional religion is frequently conflated with African cultural practices, a misinterpretation that obscures important distinctions. While there are overlaps between culture and religion, the two are not synonymous. Mokhoathi argues that African traditional religion transcends cultural practices, encompassing the entire spectrum of life, including but not limited to worship. Thus, African traditional religion subsumes culture and other

aspects of reality, rather than being reducible to culture alone. According to Akande (2013: 141), belief in God within African Traditional Religion (ATR) is closely linked to the workings of nature and the unseen forces animating it. This belief is rooted in the recognition of a higher, divine power orchestrating the universe, independent of human capabilities.

Moreover, African religions promote self-awareness, inquiry into the future, and guidance for daily life, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding complex realities (Akande, 2013: 142). This approach reflects a practical and systematic engagement with reality. For example, Orunmila—a Yoruba deity associated with divination and wisdom—is consulted by devotees seeking clarity on matters partially understood, illustrating a methodical approach to knowledge acquisition. Similarly, Ogun, the god of iron, is revered for

ensuring success and safety in tasks involving machinery, demonstrating the integration of spirituality and technology. These examples underscore that ATR involves logical, structured interactions with the world, challenging the notion that it is purely fetishistic or superstitious.

Bonsu (2018: 112) further highlights the distinctive nature of ATR, particularly its reliance on oral transmission rather than sacred texts, as seen in Christianity or Islam. This oral tradition endows ATR with flexibility, allowing it to adapt across generations and respond to societal changes. Bonsu asserts that ATR is foundational to African civilization, shaping worldviews, values, and practices, and influencing worship, family structures, social organization, environmental relations, and animal ethics. Akande (2013: 141–2) supports the view that ATR underpins the reality of African peoples by providing frameworks for knowledge,

conflict resolution, and the management of uncertainty.

The persistence of negative stereotypes—such as "savagism," "juju," "fetishism," "paganism," and "ancestral worship"—by foreign scholars, missionaries, and media outlets (Bonsu, 2016: 113) contrasts sharply with the perspective of African scholars like Mbiti (1969, cited in Bonsu, 114), who argue that African religions and philosophies constitute the matrix of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that shape the lives of most Africans. These derogatory labels, Mbiti contends, are rooted in ignorance and fail to recognize the true nature of African religion, which is an indigenous, enduring system of belief and practice (Awolalu, 1976: 26).

In summary, African Traditional Religion represents a holistic worldview guiding individuals and communities in the navigation of life's challenges. Its strength lies in

harmonizing spirituality with practical concerns, making it the foundation of African culture, identity, and civilization.

Westernization and Africa Religion

Historically, Africa's contact with Europe began with the Atlantic slave trade, later intensifying through colonialism, missionary activity, and imperialism (Arowolo, 2010: 1; Madukwe, 2010: 265). This contact led to the forced acculturation of Black populations, culminating in the mid-19th century with the assimilation of Western culture by Africans. The major phase of colonization crystallized after the Berlin Conference, driven by the quest for imperial domination of African resources and facilitated by globalization. This process was often supported or accepted by Africans due to the glorification of Western practices as superior. Consequently, indigenous religious beliefs

were displaced by foreign systems and denigrated as barbaric, savage, fetishistic, and pagan (Bonsu, 2016: 113). This facilitated the acceptance of Western domination and the easing of colonial control through missionary activity.

Arowolo (2010: 2) argues that colonialism disrupted and retarded African societal growth, forcefully imposing civilization and eroding functional aspects of society, including religious practices. During colonial contact, Western culture and religious practices were projected as hallmarks of civilization, leading to the marginalization of African religions as primitive and unacceptable in public domains. This resulted in the Westernization of African people, loss of indigenous practices, and cultural discontinuity. Madukwe (2010: 264) observes that colonization undermined African reality, affecting family, marriage, legal systems, social security, and especially traditional

religion. He maintains that belief in a higher being has always structured African social, political, and economic life—a belief system that permeated every aspect of existence (Madukwe, 2010: 265). Mbiti (1990: 2) affirms that African traditional religions "permeate all the aspects and departments of life of an African; there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious."

Contact with Europe introduced Africans to Western religious practices, particularly Christianity, often through education. Western methods of worship, distinct from African systems, were gradually assimilated. The desire for Western education led African parents to encourage their children's participation in colonial schools, accelerating the abandonment of indigenous beliefs. The religious system that once underpinned social organization, economic

direction, and moral obligations was increasingly dismissed as primitive and invaluable. Thus, African religious practices began to decline, labeled with negative terms such as black magic, juju, and fetishism (Bonsu, 2016: 113). Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart vividly illustrates this process, highlighting the disintegration of the traditional system under colonial pressure (Achebe, 1958).

Achebe (1958) shows that African religious institutions, deeply intertwined with societal frameworks, could not withstand Western encroachment. Indigenous religion was central to communal unity, customs, and values. Christianity, however, introduced division by targeting marginalized groups—such as the osu (outcasts)—excluded from full participation in Igbo society. As Achebe writes: "He [Mr. Kiaga] told them that they were now brothers and sisters, and that they should no longer think of themselves as outcasts.

He said they were no longer members of the clan but of the church." (Achebe, 1958: 156). This passage demonstrates how the missionaries' message of equality directly challenged existing social hierarchies, attracting converts and fragmenting the community. The promise of spiritual and material rewards within Christianity offered hope to those disillusioned by the rigidity of traditional systems:

The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. (Achebe, 1958: 147).

Achebe portrays missionaries as strategic agents of change, using initial Igbo tolerance to establish a foothold and gradually expanding their influence. Obierika observes:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart. (Achebe, 1958: 176).

Here, the "knife" symbolizes the destruction of communal solidarity, central to the survival of African religious institutions. Christianity's individualistic ethos replaced the communal values of Igbo religion, leading to societal disintegration. Achebe's narrative critiques the colonial disruption of African societies and laments the resulting loss of cultural cohesion.

Some argue that Western influence also produced positive effects, citing Mary Slessor's efforts to end the killing of twins in Calabar. However, Aye (2000: 2) and Imbua (2023: 215) assert that this practice was already being addressed before Slessor's arrival, particularly through the efforts of King Eyo Honesty II of the Efik people. The campaign to end twin killings began under African leadership and was later joined by Slessor. This demonstrates that Africans were not ignorant of moral issues within their traditions and were proactive in addressing them. While Slessor contributed to the campaign, it is essential to recognize the foundational role of African leaders.

The impact of Westernization on African Traditional Religion (ATR) is thus evident: colonialism, missionary work, and globalization have marginalized ATR's core worldview and practices. African religions, which are communal, orally transmitted, and closely linked to nature, have been dismissed as irrational by Western standards of rationalism, individualism, and literacy. Christianity, in particular, cast ATR as primitive and superstitious,

undermining its credibility and social standing. Missionary activities, supported by colonial authorities, promoted Christianity as a universal faith, labeling African spiritual practices as pagan or evil. The transition often involved coercion, with Christian education and economic incentives used to draw people away from their traditions. The Christian emphasis on monotheism also directly conflicted with ATR's polytheistic or pantheistic worldview, resulting in the displacement of traditional deities and rituals.

Similarities between African Religious practices and Western Religious practices

In practice, African traditional religions and Western religions—particularly Christianity and Islam—share notable similarities in various ritualistic and symbolic practices. However, while African traditional practices are often deemed primitive or idolatrous, their Western counterparts are regarded as spiritually profound.

One prominent area of convergence is the use of sacred objects in religious worship. In African traditional religion, items such as charms, amulets, and consecrated objects are commonly employed for protection, healing, and facilitating communication with the divine. These objects are believed to possess spiritual powers, either bestowed by deities or ancestors, or fortified through ritual consecration by priests (Mbiti, 1991: 102). Similarly, in Western religions—especially Christianity—sacred relics, crosses, anointing oils, and the Eucharist serve comparable functions of protection, healing, and divine communication, though they are typically regarded as inherently sacred or divinely sanctioned. Thus, while African charms may be dismissed as superstitious or fetishistic, Christian relics such as saints' bones or consecrated

wafers in the Catholic tradition are venerated as holy. This reflects a contradiction, as both sets of objects serve analogous functions; such differences in perception are informed more by cultural bias than by any intrinsic distinction (Parrinder, 1962: 118).

Another significant similarity lies in the role of sacrifices within religious devotion. In African traditional religion, animal sacrifices are frequently performed to appease spirits, seek divine intervention, or atone for transgressions. The ritual slaughter of animals and the offering of their blood to deities or ancestors is regarded as a sacred duty, deeply embedded in African cosmology (Idowu, 1973: 91). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Old Testament contains numerous references to blood sacrifices, where lambs, doves, and goats were ritually offered to obtain divine favor (Leviticus 1:3–5). The crucifixion of Jesus in Christian theology is often interpreted as the ultimate

sacrifice, superseding the need for continual animal offerings (Hebrews 10:10). Even with Christianity's historical shift from physical sacrifice to symbolic atonement, the fundamental concept of sacrifice remains central. This demonstrates that sacrifices, often condemned in African religion as barbaric or pagan, persist as key elements in Western religious tradition, albeit under different theological frameworks.

Ritual purification presents yet another area of convergence. Many African traditions require adherents to undergo purification rites after contact with certain taboos, such as death, menstrual blood, or other sources of ritual impurity (Ray, 1976: 77). These rites may involve washing with consecrated water, applying sacred substances, or reciting specific prayers. In Christianity, the sacrament of baptism functions as a means of spiritual purification, washing away sins and initiating believers into the

faith. Holy water, especially in Catholic and Orthodox traditions, is similarly used to cleanse individuals of spiritual contamination (Mbiti, 1991: 112). This parallel indicates that the concept of ritual purity transcends cultural boundaries, manifesting in distinct yet comparable forms across traditions.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of spirit possession—often condemned as demonic or occult when observed in African traditional religions— has equivalents within Western religious contexts. In African spirituality, possession by spirits or ancestors is a common occurrence, with priests or chosen devotees serving as mediums for delivering messages, performing healings, or offering guidance (Idowu, 1973: 125). In Western discourse, however, such experiences are frequently mischaracterized as primitive or malevolent. Yet similar manifestations occur in Christianity, particularly within Pentecostal and charismatic traditions, where believers are said to be filled with the Holy Spirit and may speak in tongues, prophesy, or perform miraculous healings (Acts 2:4). Despite similar structures and functions, Christian experiences are typically interpreted as divine, whereas African practices are labeled as fetishistic (Parrinder, 1962: 141).

In summary, practices that are often considered taboo or fetishistic within African traditional religions frequently have direct counterparts in Western religious traditions, where they are deemed sacred and divinely authorized. This disparity in perception underscores persistent cultural biases and notions of religious superiority.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has examined the enduring nature and significance of African traditional religion, its survival through centuries, and the

profound impact of Western thought and colonial intervention. The analysis demonstrates that African religion has suffered considerable marginalization and distortion as a result of Westernization. While it is important to acknowledge certain harmful practices historically present in some African societies—such as human sacrifice or the killing of twins—it is equally crucial to recognize that African leaders and communities themselves took proactive steps toward reform. The campaign against the killing of twins in Calabar, for instance, was initiated by local leaders like King Eyo Honesty II, reflecting the inherent capacity for ethical self-correction within African traditional religion.

The Yoruba practice of divining a newborn's destiny exemplifies the deep intentionality and care embedded in African religious life—a commitment to ensuring individual and communal prosperity and well-being. Moreover, the use of sacred objects, sacrifices, ritual purification, and spirit possession are not unique to African religions; they are also fundamental to Western religious traditions. The primary distinction lies not in the substance of these practices, but in the cultural narratives that frame them: practices revered as holy in Western contexts are often dismissed as primitive or fetishistic when found in African contexts.

Recognizing these parallels is essential for fostering a more nuanced and equitable understanding of global religious diversity. The persistent negative branding of African traditional practices as "fetish" or "black magic" is rooted in colonial-era stereotypes and cultural biases, rather than objective assessment. By critically re-examining these narratives, this paper asserts that African religion is far from the negativity often ascribed to it.

Instead, it stands as the bedrock of African society—a vital source of identity, moral guidance, and a holistic worldview that continues to shape the everyday lives and realities of its adherents.

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