EXAMINING THE PLACE OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN A POSTCOLONIAL WORLD

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Abstract

Nghipudilo Ya Shiindi (2024), a traditional spiritual community leader from the Oshiwambo ethnicity in Namibia, recently decried that in the twenty-first century we find ourselves in an evil world in which African culture is being eroded in the name of development. Nghipudilo Ya Shiindi's statement is instructive; it speaks to what is being witnessed by many Africans today across the continent, namely, the gradual but systematic degeneration of African traditional knowledge systems and cultural norms due to foreign influences. Key among those outside influences are foreign religions (specifically Christianity and Islam), and the Westernization of social, economic, and political practices. Before colonization and the spread of foreign religions in Africa, many African societies practised worship of the divine through (traditional) spirituality, which encompassed numerous local gods, and/or pantheistic and panentheistic practices. The fundamental aim of this conceptual study is to examine the place of traditional African spiritual practices in the context of these competing influences, and the ways in which these spiritual practices have been transformed and adapted to conform to these imposed religions. The study finds that, while African traditional practices have been significantly eroded, African cultural norms remain relevant and useful alternatives to other knowledge systems, and Africans should embrace their cultural identity with pride. The study concludes that the continued relevance of traditional African spiritual practices hinges on local culture itself being transformative and flexible to meet the challenges of a technologically fast-advancing global world.

Keywords: African Spirituality, Traditional Knowledge Systems, Religion, Cultural Identity, Postcolonial Thought.

INTRODUCTION

This conceptual study aims to examine the utility and sustainability of African traditional practices as part of the indigenous knowledge systems in the context of the influences of modernity (i.e., the Westernization of global practices) and foreign religions (Christianity and Islam), and to assess how African spiritual culture can remain relevant under the circumstances.

Spirituality is about seeking a meaningful connection with the divine, or the higher being, which manifests sentiments such as contentment, gratitude, and peace. Contrary to foreign religions in Africa such as Christianity and Islam that partition religion into specific days (and times) of the week, African spirituality cannot be separated from the daily activities of life. The synthesis of spirituality is about seeking a meaningful connection with the divine, or the higher being, which manifests sentiments such as contentment, gratitude, and peace. In this connection, spirituality sees every day as a sacred day (Olupona, 2000).

As such, a visible marker of engagement of African people with others is that the African cultural disposition resists instrumental logics and instead, expresses harmony, not through contest, but through relational posture rooted in the principle of complimentary logics. This interpretation aligns with philosophical understanding of a person in African society: that communities practice moderate communitarianism, whereby individual autonomy is not negated as it is an essential element in the construction of every communitarianism component that the

society seeks to build (Gyekye, 2010). Small (2022) describes spirituality as the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose; it is the way people experience their connectedness to self, to others, and nature. In this way, the spiritual dimension endeavours to be in harmony with the internal, external, and eternal balance of the cosmos. Thus, for traditional Africans, spirituality informs their everyday life. Spirituality encompasses any form of (timeless) experience that brings people into contact with nature and the divine (Nghipudilo Ya Shiindi, 2024), and the cultural nuances need to be understood in their proper context.

Instead of having a uniform religion, as Christianity or Islam have positioned themselves, pre-colonial Africa had various distinct and cultural-specific spiritual and religious practices that were neither paganism nor fetishism in disposition. Precolonial societies believed in deities and gods as avenues to the supreme creator; furthermore, they shared a belief in ancestral veneration, i.e., the idea that the deceased elders of the community were highly regarded as moral guardians and intermediaries to the gods (Mbiti, 1975; Idowu, 1973).

ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY & FOREIGN RELIGIONS

From their inception, traditional African norms were built around the realm of spirituality, which embodies their philosophy and heritage that informs the actions, interpretations, and perceptions of their worldview. Lumanze (2023, p. 44) suggests that the African spiritual way of life was a form of worship to the divine, or God, built on the values of solidarity, goodness, and communalism. African epistemology is closely tied to the interconnection between the physical and metaphysical realms, as evidenced by the belief system of ancestral worship and the concept of rebirth in spiritual forms. Thus, ascribing mystical explanations and meanings to physical phenomena is central to traditional life, whereby essential aspects of local knowledge gained over the generations have been enshrined in spiritual decrees and practices (Falola, 2022).

African spirituality is diverse and creative, with varied expressions; as such, its ontology differs from that of organised religious entities. Much of traditional African culture holds the belief that the nature and development of the universe are boundless and therefore cannot be confined to any specific scripts, whether religious or academic.

Scholars such as Parrinder (1949, 1954), Idowu (1962, 1973), and Mbiti (1969) dismiss the colonial claim that pre-colonial Africa did not have its own religions. These scholars argue that African peoples possessed coherent, sophisticated religious systems. This essentially means that indigenous African spiritual and religious life was methodically structured long before colonialism, such that spirituality was the core variable of people's daily existence. Thus, the features of African spiritual life such as oral transmission, communal rootedness, a lack of any single founder of spirituality and religion, and no missionary impulse, show evidence of characteristics of a 'kind of religion,' rather than as evidence that no religion existed before colonisation. In this context, within the African traditions and spiritual way of life, there have been varied religions with their own distinct ontologies.

A major point of departure between spirituality and organised religion in Africa is that traditional Africans are cosmologists and not theologians. Whereas religion is institutional, the practice of spirituality is itself the cultural way of life (Litchfield-Tshabalala, 2024). Through spirituality, traditional Africans encounter multiple layers of serendipity, benevolence, and ecstasy. In this context, spirituality does not require religion; yet the construction of religion itself is derived from spirituality. For instance, in spirituality, every day is considered sacred, whereas in religion, there are designated days of worship, such as Sunday, Saturday, and Friday. Traditional African spiritual experiences are thus both sacred and transcendent, with a deep sense of interconnectedness with nature, humanity, and all species of the universe (Haramanuba, 2023; Gwangwa & Maponga, 2019).

Etta & Onah (2024, pp.39-40) identify three propositions of African traditional spirituality:

> (1) it is based on oral historical teachings, and not based on written scripts,
>
> (2) it has no founder or singular hero like Jesus in Christianity or Mohammed in Islam,
>
> (3) it has neither missionaries nor the propensity to propagate itself (by force or by conquest) to other people of different regions and continents.

African spirituality teaches that the earth – including all its species/inhabitants – is a sacred entity that should be cared for and respected. For traditional Africans, nature itself is God. Thus, from the traditional African way of life, no person, entity, or religion is superior to the other because the spiritual life teaches that people have different and complementary talents, and that knowledge is multifaceted, which means each person can learn from the other. Mkhize (2020) asserts that in traditional African spirituality, every person can heal, only that each person heals through their trade. For this reason, there is no 'great healer' or the idea of idolising any person for their talents, because the greatness of their works comes from the source, the divine, and the ancestral spirits.

This paper thus explores some concepts of African traditional worship, comparing these to the tenets of the main Western religions imposed on Africa in the colonial era.

Knowledge and the divine

The African spiritual way of life acknowledges that knowledge is diverse and not a preserve of any person, ethnicity, entity, religion, race, or ideology. Hence, humans and all other earthly species, such as trees, animals, rivers, mountains, birds, and insects (as a collective nature), must be revered and preserved. For traditional Africans, God is a divine being whose presence is manifest in all earthly species; thus, God is omnipresent and neither male nor female (Nghipudilo Ya Shiindi, 2024; Mukaria,2021, p.4) also argues that for Africans, a belief in the sacredness of nature was rooted in the sacred and divine presence in the natural world. Nature was considered a sacred place for prayers, reflections, contemplations, health, and wholeness. African traditional spirituality was intrinsically eco-friendly, where natural species such as forests, rocks, rivers, and mountains became spaces where they found companionship and sustenance. For instance, nature provided herbs and medicines for people's healing. This built a trusted relationship between the living, the non-living, and nature.

That said, there is a wide variety among African spiritual traditions. For example, long before colonization, the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria regarded the Ogun as a god, a deity of iron and blacksmith whose power they believed manifested through the metallurgical creativity and innovation of the local blacksmith. Olusegan (2017) asserts that the Ogun deities are believed to derive their power from the supreme being. As such, the high regard for the Ogun deity and the associated rituals performed with its literary and cultural artefacts is believed to bring unity and success to society. Crucially, blacksmith innovations were believed to be a direct result of the power of the Ogun which allowed the blacksmith to produce creative and essential ancient tools such as spears, warrior items, axes, and farming hoes that were necessary for the development of society. Thus, the Ogun - being the god of iron - was seen as a powerful creator of development and was also believed to possess the power for destruction. In this context, the Ogun is a warrior and protector who embodies justice for the community. Drawing from Barnes (1997), the Ogun could also be interpretated in other contexts: for instance, it is believed that the Ogun formed part of the rituals performed by elders to purify those who had killed others, whether in civilian situations or during war situations. While the Ogun is originally known as a god of warfare, iron, and hunting, that definition has since expanded to include contemporary elements of technology associated with metals, and other forms of infrastructural development (Barnes, 1997; Olusegan, 2017).

In contrast, Zulu spirituality recognizes Unkulunkulu as the Supreme Creator, though there are also other gods and goddesses such as Nomhoyi/Mamlambo, goddess of rivers; Nomkhubulwane (sometimes known as the 'Zulu Demeter'), associated with agriculture, rain and beer; uNgungi, for blacksmiths; and Sonzwaphi, for healing. Zulu spirituality also acknowledges spirits, but Zulus do not pray to these directly; instead, they burn incense which they believe allows them to connect and speak with their ancestors. These beliefs are passed on orally, and even though the stories encapsulating them change over time, they all share the idea that the human and spirit worlds are interconnected, and that through divination they can bridge these realms (Thomas & Alanamu, 2019).

Christianity, which came with Western colonization, teaches that the earth is cursed and will ultimately be destroyed, and that only the righteous will ascend to heaven. Christianity also holds that God lives in Heaven. Furthermore, unlike in African spirituality, in which gender is not the determining factor in leadership or governance, Christian leadership is gender specific, where God is a man, Jesus is a man, the angels are all men, and the top church leaders (Priests, Bishops, Apostles, Prophets, Popes) are essentially, men. This disparity in the understanding of the divine, humanity, and the universe between indigenous African spiritual systems and Christianity has been a source of much confusion in Africa, where Christianity - using the leverage of imperialism, has systematically stigmatised most African indigenous systems by labelling them as evil, backward, and redundant – a legacy that still endures today (Litchfield-Tshabalala, 2024).

Ancestors

In African culture, time is secular, not linear; thus, time is not tied to duration but is something that is eternal; that is why the dead (ancestors) are never *gone* but still *live* and guide us in spirit (Simuziya, 2026). Death is not considered the end of a person's journey, as people continue to live in the afterlife in a spiritual form (Dews, 2022; Smith, 2018). The ancestors are people who once lived in the physical world with their kinsmen, and are commonly known as the *living dead,* because they are still living on in spiritual form and monitoring clan activities. It is believed that they have the power to bring prosperity or misfortune to the clan, depending on the relationship that exists between them. Therefore, to maintain a favourable relationship with ancestors, the living venerates the ancestors. Typically, ancestors are people who led exemplary lives that continue to inspire the community (Mudzudza, 2024; Ukwamedua, 2018). Although this may invite comparisons with Christian saints – inspirational individuals who are venerated and adored as the minor deities of classical paganism – African ancestors are not worshipped but are revered mortals who inspire the clan.

The primary role of ancestors is to look after the welfare of their descendants and have the power beyond human capacity; the power of the gods of the land, such as the power to bring rain or to bring disasters such as strange diseases, drought, floods as punishment for disobeying ancestral codes. In this context, ancestors are seen as mediators and a means to God. Because of their spiritual power, ancestors can harm or protect the community (Buhring, 2022). For instance, when strange illnesses occur, or when there is crop failure, the community believes that it is a warning from ancestors that there is something wrong that people in the community have done that violates ancestral codes. Since ancestors are parents (although dead), they must discipline their children (the living) when they go astray (Mudzudza, 2024). The punishment associated with failure to adhere to traditional ancestral codes could lead to a variety of misfortunes, such as the deaths of domestic animals from a mysterious disease. Such happenings would signal to the community that the ancestors are angry (Coe et al., 2013, pp. 110-128).

Ancestral codes also involve acts of pleasing the gods and respecting cultural heritage; this includes honouring ancestors in sacred shrines where rituals and sacrifices are performed. These rituals are avenues through which the gods and ancestors bless the clan. Refusal to offer a sacrifice or failure to perform ritual festivals would amount to disregard for the ancestral codes. In most African traditions, music and dance are not mere activities but important cultural and ritualistic practices that symbolize a sense of human existence. Through music, a variety of moral expressions and life meanings guided by ancestors are manifested (Perman, 2011).

Gender and marriage

The spiritual dimensions of the African person can also be seen by how names are given to people in a gender-neutral way, whereby a name is often unisex, denoting that gender is not, and never has been an issue in traditional African society. Women were seen as playing a complementary role in societal development, and thus, were never seen as 'less than' men (Simuziya, 2023). Unlike in the West, marriage in Africa is not a matter for only two people, because traditional kinsmen from both sides of the families must participate to legitimise the marriage (Lumanze, 2023). Over time, most of the colonial and Western practices have undermined such conventional traditional practices, especially through Western legislation models and linguistic colonialism, resulting in the stigmatization of indigenous knowledge systems.

HEALERS AND WITCHES

Mythological consciousness and the belief in the supernatural take various forms: in some instances, community misfortunes such as a strange illness coming to the village might compel village authorities to call a witch doctor (traditional doctor), especially in situations where it is suspected that someone is practising witchcraft. In South Africa, witch doctors are called 'Sangomas' or healers, while in Zambia, they are called *Ng'anga*. A witch doctor's primary role in those cases is to cleanse the village by performing rituals and to catch the sorcerers responsible for those misfortunes and evil deeds. Thus, a witch doctor is more powerful than a sorcerer, and the practices of a witch doctor should not be confused with those of a sorcerer, because a witch doctor is a spiritual healer, while a sorcerer is someone who engages mainly in evil practices that are harmful to society. Witch doctors use spells, i.e., they perform rituals, using words and phrases that are believed to have mystical powers that provide insights into otherwise complicated human conditions (Lungu & Nswana, 2020).

Those found guilty of practising witchcraft, on the other hand, often end up with a ruined reputation for their entire family, and the stigma they suffer becomes so profound that leaving the village to go into exile becomes the only viable option. In other cases, victims are expelled from the village, while in other instances, they are made to forfeit their livestock or surrender part of their harvest (Boateng & Sottie, 2021).

The ambiguity of the perceived dual status of healers and witches

However, the healer/witch distinction is not always clear-cut. There is an ambiguity regarding their supernatural powers, whereby instead of being distinctively separate, the healer (witch doctor) and the witch (sorcerer) may operate interchangeably, given that they all derive their powers from the supernatural. Accordingly, it is argued that the main difference between them lies mainly in the intent of their actions and personal disposition because, essentially, they draw from the same supernatural force, differing only in orientation. Fratkin (1991) and Westerlund (2006) whose studies in Kenya focused on the Maasai/Samburu ethnic group's *Loibonok* (i.e., revered ritual and divine leaders), assert that the *Loibonok* operate outside the usual realm of societal practices because for them to successfully fight sorcerers, and bring peace to the land, they must themselves weird a supernatural force that is more menacing than that of the sorcerer.
Thus, the witch doctor is perceived, not simply as a healer, but also as a 'dangerous' practitioner; for if they have the power to neutralise the sorcerer's wicked intentions, that alone confirms that they too have the capacity to perform sorcery. The ethnographic records show that this ambiguity on their real status usually dependent on the context. A study by Anderson (1993) provides an additional instructive example into another ethnic group in Kenya, the Nandi ethnicity who regard the *Orkoiik* as revered ritual and spiritual leaders. The Nandi's O*rkoiik* were equally revered as prophets and diviners (healers) who were believed to possess supernatural powers as seers, healers and mentors, and yielded tremendous political influence especially on the security of the society.

Yet, with all the reverence as healers of the society, they were also feared as witches (sorcerers). Because of this ambiguity of a dual status, the British colonial authorities exploited this gap by branding them only as sorcerers, especially in the wake of the notorious colonial legislation: the witchcraft ordinances. This malicious branding of the O*rkoiik* and the *Loibonok* was craftly designed to justify their deportation as a way of neutralising local political opposition. Geschiere (1997) documents a similar pattern of healer reverence among the Cameroonian *Nganga* (traditional healer) and the difficulties the postcolonial states have had in legally separating bona fide healers from sorcerers. Geschiere's study shows how the ambiguity in distinguishing healers from sorcerers is not just a historical or colonial matter but also a contemporary legislative quagmire. Lawmakers are faced with a real challenge in distinguishing between real traditional healers and sorcerers, because the law cannot qualify, quantify or regulate practices that operate in the supernatural.

Pushback on Eurocentric mystifications about traditional healers

However, other scholars push back against the Eurocentric perception that sees African belief systems and norms only as outmoded cults and superstitions. Haar (2009) argues that spiritual power is a justifiable form of organizational culture with a framework for ethical values, moral guidance, mutual trust, community development and individual well-being. For Haar, rather than seeing the *Nganga*, the *Sangoma*, the O*rkoiik* or the *Loibonok* as sources of societal disruption, they must instead be appreciated as anchors of societal harmony and development. Their work must also be lauded, for instance, for how the African Initiated Churches (AIC) and other contemporary spiritual organisations have drawn inspiration from indigenous spiritual practices, leading to the successful incorporation of some local perspectives that offer moral order in society. Being independent entities from mainstream Christianity, it can be argued that the various AICs, such as the Zion Church, and the Nazareth Baptist Church (in South Africa), the Aladura Movement (in Nigeria), and the Kimbanguist Church (in the DRC), contributed to the growth of Black theology and the emancipatory movements which saw some African nationalists drawing on their faith to resist colonialism (Anderson, 2001).

Dickson (1984) also argues that the Eurocentric framing of African traditions suffers from a deficiency of deeper understanding of the underlying logics of indigenous norms and value systems. For Dickson, the *Nganga* or the *Orkoiik* is not an ambiguous institution or figure who must be feared as a sorcerer, but as an instrumental anchor and custodian of cultural life and societal symmetry. Ela (2005) adds that indigenous spiritual systems such as the

Nganga or the *Loibonok* provide the community with authentic moral authority – a feat the Church has struggled to achieve because the Christianity practiced in many parts of Africa is Eurocentric in disposition, and therefore lacks the intimate connection with African norms and systems. Ela cautions that Christianity in Africa must move from passivity into a radical emancipatory vehicle whose aims, purposes and goals must be rooted in local cultural identity.

For Ela, theology and Christian worship must not be informed by Eurocentric frames but should instead begin from the life struggles of the local ordinary person and the wisdom of the African village. Thus, for Haar (2009), Dickson (1984) and Ela (2005), indigenous spiritual concepts are instruments of resistance against neo-colonial orders, to ensure that positions of moral authority are preserved. Thus, this spiritual resistance operates to push back and disrupt both the Western condescending imperialist tendencies, and the propensities of corrupt local and treacherous Africa elites.

THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION (ATR) IN CIVIL (ARMED) CONFLICTS

In civil conflicts, the weaponization and politicization of indigenous belief systems is often employed to mobilize and legitimize the ensuing atrocities. While African Traditional Religion (ATR) is seldom used in its complete form during civil (armed) conflicts, its spiritual propositions are blended into civil conflict rhetorics accompanied by premeditated socio-political ideologies. Kastfelt (2005) points out that there is a religious rationality in civil conflicts, where fighters rely on spiritual beliefs to spark meaning in their war mission. For instance, in Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a notorious Christian extremist rebel group led by Joseph Kony, claimed that its aim is to fight to restore the 'Ten Commandments' of the Bible. However, Kastfelt observes that the LRA's war agenda was also mixed with indigenous spiritual practices such as ritual purifications, initiations, and occult doctrines, performed especially on child soldiers to gain unquestionable obedience from them, and thus to legitimize war atrocities and promote martyrdom.

Reid (2023) asserts that historically, indigenous African cosmologies guided the physical execution and the moral limits of warfare. In other words, traditional systems demanded spiritual limits to mass atrocities and guided on whether atrocities were even necessary. Over time, however, this measured African disposition towards conflicts was disrupted due to foreign influences, notably, the coming of the colonial project and Western Christianity. The difference was that, unlike indigenous systems, the foreign influences (colonialism and Christianity) both inherently carried intolerant dispositions, such as conquest of land and coercive ploys for religious conversion. Basedau et al. (2016) add that when religious identities run parallel with ethnic affiliations, the religious occult leaders and political elite exploit ATR to create rigid and intolerant distinct groups. While traditional links can be productive for conflict resolution, they become deadly catalysts when weaponized by the elite who exploit spiritual and religious grievances. There is therefore a tension in that, while ATR's internal logic may be tolerant, its instrumentalization by political and military actors can nonetheless contribute to violence.

That said, prominent Islamic scholars such as Ali Mazrui and Sulayman Nyang, offer a different perspective regarding the link between warfare and ATR. In his seminal publication, '*The Africans: A Triple Heritage, 1986',* Mazrui challenges the assertion that ATR is an instrument of weaponizing warfare, arguing that of the three legacies that shape Africa, i.e., ATR, Islam, and Christianity, the ATR stands out as the most open-minded and most tolerant of others because it does not seek to convert or indoctrinate any person. Because of this inherent amenable disposition, the ATR does not have a concept of 'universal truth' or theology which must be forced upon other societies. As such, the need to wage so-called 'holy wars', or the idea of embarking upon religious crusades does not register with ATR. This disposition aligns with the spiritual lifestyle of indigenous African norm systems. Nyang (2012) supports Mazrui's position by adding that African cosmologies have a distinctive, and flexible system for cultural and religious accommodation.

Nyang posits that before the arrival of Abrahamic faiths; ATR operated on a logic of pluralism and coexistence with other communities without seeking to convert them. It is this quality of restraint, open-mindedness and not possessing a rigid theology that made it possible for Islam and Christianity to take root so peacefully on the continent. Other scholars that support this view include Joseph Ki-Zerbo who asserted that in pre-Islam and pre-Christian Africa, there were no wars of religion because indigenous cultures saw religion as something that is

ancestral, local and linked to identities. Ki-Zerbo (1962) pointedly asserts that because of this indigenous characteristic of defining norms systems and each society's traditions within their own context, the idea of holy wars or forceful cross border faith conversions were simply not feasible. Thus, ATR has long understood a core principle of spiritual life: that sacred truth cannot be reduced to a single universal formula, as it is always contingent upon the mysteries of human existence and cultural context.

A CRITIQUE OF FOREIGN RELIGIONS IN AFRICA

The arrival of foreign religions in Africa has brought significant changes to the social and cultural fabric of African traditional society. Whereas previously the spiritual life embraced every person, the experience now is different, as people no longer see themselves as brothers/sisters; instead, they become enemies or competitors due to the inherent discriminatory character of religions. Religious intolerance (the superiority and purity mindset) has often led to segregation, stigmatization, subjugation, religious conflicts, wars, hatred, and exploitation (Lumanze, 2023). Prothero (2011) asserts that although religions are influential in today's life, they are diverse and have different approaches towards solving human challenges, and in this context, it could be argued that they do not serve the same God. Scheitle & Ecklund (2020) also add that religion continues to be a major divisive factor among people due to intolerance. Lumanze (2023) points out that because of the competing superiority mindset, for instance, of Islam and Christianity, reproducing their culture and imposing it on the Africans was seen as part of the mission to 'civilize' Africans. Drawing from the study of Bello (2018), Obedben Lumanze bemoans the superiority and competitive mindset of religions when he argues that:

> …Islam is described as a comprehensive code of conduct, offering guidance to its followers on various aspects of life, including dietary practices. dress code, business conduct, etiquette, marriage, divorce, and human rights. It is asserted that the Holy Qur'an provides a standard by which one may live. For Muslims, any non-Muslim is often seen as a *second-class* citizen. Islam teaches that non-Muslims are to be treated as conquered people. As such, the desire to make all humans submit to Allah and their Prophet Mohammed to propagate his religion motivated them to carry out Jihad in Africa (Lumanze, 2023, p.51).

Lumanze (2023, p.51) further laments the mindset of the other competing religion (Christianity) when he argues that:

> …according to Christian teachings, only Christianity and Jesus Christ provide a path to peace and eternal happiness. Hence, Paul and other early Christian authors projected Judeo-Christian cultures and values to be above any other. Jesus of Nazareth, founder of Christianity, instructed his disciples to spread his teachings widely and gain converts. This command: 'go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit', is thus the major motivation that made Western missionaries take Christianity to Africa.

These narratives illustrate the contrasting and superior dispositions of religions over other systems, cultures, and traditional values. Religion presented itself in Africa as the all-encompassing knowledge reservoir worship system, which is above scrutiny, and any traditional African who dares to question its foundational claims is swiftly demonised as a non-believer, pagan, evil, and uncivilized. Christian theology, particularly, has long privileged Eurocentric notions of whiteness, for instance, through the image of a white Jesus, which continues to perpetuate power imbalances. It can be argued that the Bible has been misinterpreted and misrepresented by asserting that white cultural values have the same efficacy as biblical principles (Iluzada, 2021). Religion has been presented as the only avenue for the protection of dignity and human rights, yet there is no convincing reason that suggest that religion ensures human rights. Instead, religions promote divisions among people through the holier-than-thou mindsets (Akena, 2014).

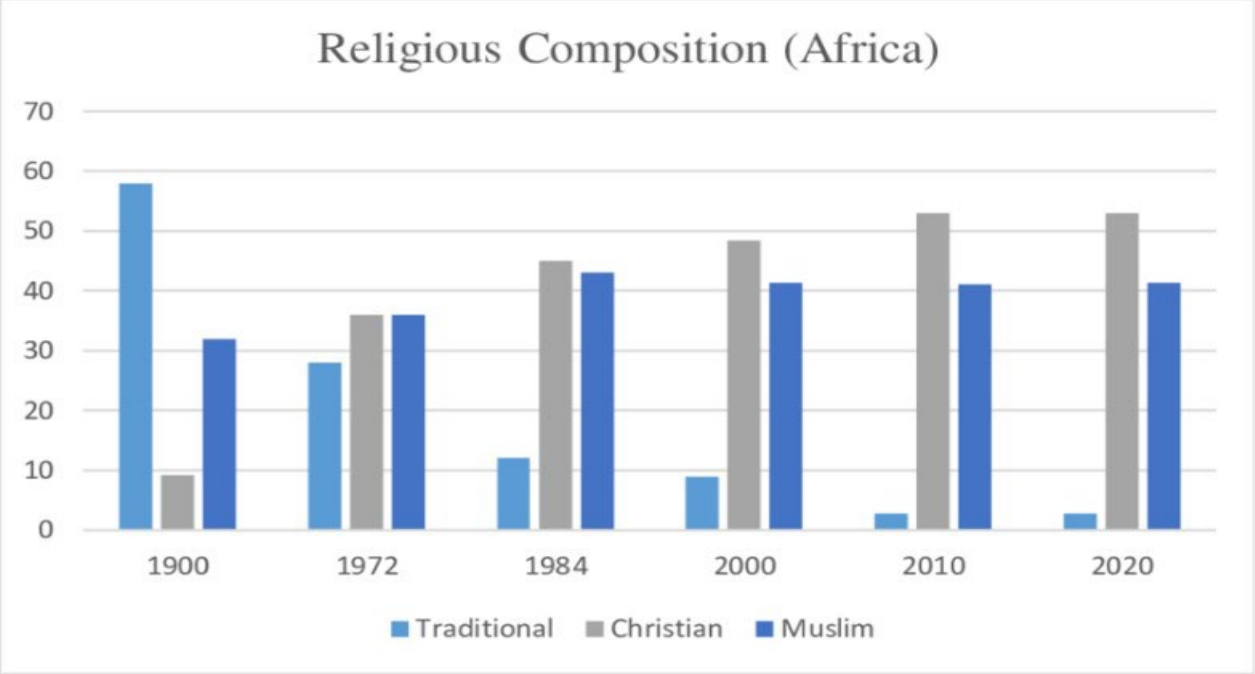
Studies by Gillborn (2006), Ball et al. (2022), and Crenshaw (2019) point out that white supremacy operates on the idea that the interests and perceptions of Europeans should take centre stage and be the standard for all people elsewhere. This challenge can be evidenced by the prevalence of racism across the Western world. Racism is based on a complex of discriminatory tendencies based on race, nationality, origin, accent, visual features, ethnicity, and creed. Dividing people into categories has a historic link with Western *racial science,* which created a hierarchy of races and pushed European cultural ideas on African civilisations, frequently portraying indigenous cultures as

inferior. Indeed, while missionaries may well have seen their work as fulfilling their religious and social duty, their work was characterised as the 'civilising mission', or '*mission civilisatrice*', with indigenous populations often referred to as natives or even 'savages', meaning wild and thus uncivilised. Such a classification not only dismissed African spiritual practices as heathen and thus worthless but functioned as an instrument upon which Western colonial oppression of subaltern populations could be justified. Osemuyi (2024, p.24) points out that colonialism and imperialism have had severe societal repercussions on Africa's development. Religion (specifically, Christianity and Islam) has been a destabilizing factor in Africa and has increased levels of societal intolerance, including causing civil strife in certain instances. Unlike organised religions, which have barriers (i.e., the tendency of 'them and us'), traditional African spirituality cuts across all spheres of life and transcends all forms of identity, whether political, religious, ethnic, or racial. Bello (2018, p. 28) asserts that Christianity and colonialism were brought to Africa by Europeans, while Islam was brought to the continent by Arabs, through conquest to tap African resources.

It was with such a domineering and condescending attitude that Arabs and Europeans established their religious entities in Africa, where locals were manipulated to abandon their traditional spiritual worship systems and embrace foreign religions. Africans were required to adopt Western or Arabic systems; for instance, the local dress code, names, and food were gradually replaced by foreign ones. This resulted in a loss of cultural identity among local people, as their traditional norms and practices were belittled. Currently, Western and Arab cultural influences through religion are deeply embedded in African societies, leading to complex discussions and considerations regarding the lost cultural identity among Africans (Simuziya, 2025). There is also a sense in which the proponents of Christian and Muslim religion present their own religion as something that is a prerequisite to the existence of God. Yet God (from the spiritual perspective) exists with or without religion. Simply put, God, in a spiritual sense, does not need any religion to be recognised as God.

Figure 1 provides a quantitative element that complements the qualitative content analysis. It contributes to the analysis pertaining to the status of spirituality in Africa, and how it has declined over time due to the influence of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) and how these religions have now overshadowed African traditional spirituality and indigenous worship systems.

Figure 1. (Source: Mbiti, 2020).



DISCUSSION

The conversion of Africans to foreign religions was also strategic for maintaining political and social control. By imposing their religions, colonizers sought to weaken traditional societal structures, including indigenous spiritual practices, which often played a significant role in governance and cultural identity. Henrik Clarke (2024) cautioned Africans about the trap of foreign religions, which have increased divisiveness among people, when he said that "we must stop this nonsense about who belongs to what religion when [...] all of them were imposed on us" and must end the Muslim-Christian conflict. Clarke exhorts Africans to examine their acceptance of these imposed religions as an 'interpretation of something that we already had all along': he does not promote violent or destructive means but encourages Africans to treat 'everything that touches your life,' including religion, as either 'an instrument of your liberation,' or something to be rejected as Africans move forward into the future.

Clarke's message forms part of the 'resilience' message to Africans to maintain indigenous practices as opposed to the current situation where many Africans, due to colonial indoctrination, have adopted foreign religions without much critical thinking. Thus, the gist of Clarke's narration is that Africans need to see value in their own traditional systems, rather than adopt foreign ideologies simply because they originate from the colonial West. In essence, Clarke is insinuating that Western practices cannot be the standard for Africa: that Africa must have its own standards because Western standards are fallaciously presented as 'global standards,' when in fact this is not the case.

The bizarre aspect of Western Christianity is that it tells Africans to abandon their spiritual worship systems and denounce the belief in ancestral powers: the Western church regards African ancestors as demons who needed to be exorcised. Instead, Africans are told to trust and believe in Jesus, whom they have never seen and who has no hereditary or cultural connections with them (Nghipudilo Ya Shiindi, 2024).

Religion has thrived through conquest, the forceful conversion of faith, and the illegal occupation of indigenous lands. Karl Marx's metaphorical assertion that religion is the opium of the people was meant to argue that the proletariat suffers because of their exploitation by the capitalist and imperialist forces. People fail to realize this manipulative trap because religion teaches them that their misery is God's will. Thus, religion conceals the role of the bourgeoisie (the conqueror) in the exploitation of the proletariat (the conquered) (Marx, 1844).

The connection between poverty and religion is best described by a media commentator on the African Diaspora News Channel who argues that:

> "Africans will never be able to fight poverty as long as Christianity exists. African Christianity glorifies poverty. There are (many) Africans out there thinking the more you suffer, the closer you are to God because God (supposedly) tests only his strongest soldiers. Meanwhile, church pastors are purchasing new cars or expanding their churches to increase profits". (African Diaspora News, 2023).

This concern is also implied in a study by Taylor (2006, pp.31-32), which concluded that religion was exploited as a pacification tool to extract African resources and solidify the colonial project with minimal resistance from the local population. Christianity offers a paradox: it was brought by Europeans who claimed that the faithful are promised salvation in Heaven, yet African natural resources were being exploited and looted under the guise of commerce by the same Europeans who claimed that religion is against theft. Missionary activities facilitated the indoctrination of many African people into the Christian faith, thus helping to reduce African resistance to imperialism. For this reason, Taylor (2006) asserts that the foundations of colonialism and imperialism were laid as much with imperial guns as with the religious scripts.

The problem with foreign religions is that they have created a false impression that they brought God to Africans, when in fact the African people have known God since time immemorial. The African person, being the earliest human on the planet, already knew God, the divine, and that is why they practiced spirituality, which treated every earthly species as sacred. For the traditional African, God is nature itself; hence, God cannot be confined to religious boundaries (Gwangwa & Maponga, 2019). African cultures have always known God as the maker of the universe, the supreme being who is mystified by natural occurrences such as thunder, storms, lightning, and the phenomenon of day and night (Edet, 2009). African cultures acknowledged that God existed, for instance, through practices such as paying homage to the supreme being or to the gods by performing ritual celebrations before harvest (Mboya, undated interview).

Joshua Maponga, a spiritual leader, observes that decolonization should cover all aspects of life, including religions. For Maponga, the era of colonialism with all its aspects has gone past its sell-by date. Maponga argues that now is the time for the white Jesus to pack his bags and go back where he came from, and for Mohammad and Islam to return to Saudi Arabia (Karowangoro, 2024).

Sifuna (2022) cautions that religious institutions (inherently) carry conflicting meanings of their teachings. On the one hand, they propagate themselves as spaces of prayer, ethical, and moral counsel. On the other hand, they become avenues of moral passivity, where prayer and the *word of God* are selective and often interpreted out of context to avoid accountability. As a result, religious entities often breed stagnation in societal transformation, i.e., they become arenas where so-called *religious faith/hope* becomes the stumbling block for growth. As Karl Marx pointed out, religion is weaponized both as a coping instrument and as a tool of complicity. Because of this, the transformation of society through religion becomes a tall order to attain. In particular, the Pentecostal movements have misled many of their faithful through false teachings, especially the teachings concerning the prosperity gospel, which promises miracles and wealth, and have led the faithful to be vulnerable to manipulative bishops, pastors, and evangelists masquerading as healers.

Contemporary scholarship on African spirituality pushes back on the Western- (Christian-) biased view and labelling of African traditional worship practices as systems that are static, outmoded and primitive. Marumo & Chikale (2018) argue that rather than seeing African forms of worship and spirituality as backward, the Western or otherwise colonial frames should see African systems as useful alternative knowledge epistemologies. For Marumo and Chikale, the reverence of deities and ancestral spirits in Africa are essential aspects of the traditional African systems and as such, those practices must be comprehended within the context of the African mythological philosophies and culture. Olupona (2015) also argues in support of African traditional spirituality and asserts that traditional forms of worship and spirituality cannot be separated from the daily lives of traditional African people. For Olupona, spirituality as a practice, is an embodiment of the African traditional person. Olupona adds that despite the predominance of foreign religions on the continent, African spirituality remains dynamic, flexible and open to reform as reform itself encompasses innovation, and dynamism, and therefore, reform is necessary for the sustainability of traditional spirituality.

This can be seen in the example of the Zulu people, whose traditional spirituality features a “sky god”. While earlier scholars have argued that "there is no evidence of belief in a heavenly deity or sky god in Zulu religion before the advent of Europeans" (Hexham, 1981), other late-twentieth-century scholars such as Krige, Schapera, and Hammond-Took disagree; they argue that the "lord of heaven" or Zulu sky god has always existed in the traditional Zulu belief system, a deity who they argue is greater than the "archetypal ancestor and creator, Unkulunkulu". (Chidester et al, 1997, p. 246). Indeed, Unkulunkulu is sometimes conflated with the sky god Umvelinqangi ("he who was in the very beginning"), the god of thunder, earthquake whose other name is Unsondo, and is the son of Unkulunkulu (the Father) and Nomkhubulwane (the mother). There are thus strong parallels between the Christian Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the latter often denoted as feminine. The elevation of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God (in human form as Jesus), also provides an embodiment of the feminine, mother-figure to counter the patriarchal dominance of Christianity. A parallel for the Zulu spirits can also be found in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, which believes the saints can intercede on behalf of humans, with the Virgin Mary as the ultimate sainted persona. Such African spiritual traditions thus can evolve by absorbing elements of Christianity without losing sight of their core values.

A close reading from scholars such as Olupona, and Marumo and Chikale, suggest that contemporary African scholarship – in the main - sees the link between spirituality and the natural world as interconnected and complementary facets essential for human understanding of both the historical and contemporary worlds. To be sure, in many African traditional societies to date, the concept of togetherness, mutual respect, restraint, unity of purpose, and societal harmony (which are central aspects of spirituality), remain living features of African traditional life. Furthermore, the continued performance of traditional practices such as seeking healing from traditional healers, the performance of rituals during festivals, the idea of making sacrifices as part of honouring the ancestral codes, and concept of honouring sacred shrines, shows the indigenous capacity of resilience, and adaptation of African spirituality.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the ways in which many African traditional practices still have relevance to African societies' cultural identity and should therefore be preserved as a rich heritage. We have acknowledged the complexities of contemporary African societies, and highlighted the fact that Africa does not constitute one uniform tradition. It was the European Christian missionaries who began the destruction of these many local traditions through the missionary schools and missionary churches that dismissed indigenous practices as primitive, evil, and backward. As a result, African spiritual beliefs have been undermined and demeaned, a cultural misconfiguration that became not only an attack on traditional norms, but also a means to secure perpetual control of locals by way of infusing a psychological inferiority complex into their minds. In this way, their resistance to foreign domination was neutralised, with the resulting damage to traditional beliefs and practices that we see today. The influence of globalization has further compounded this situation, with spiritual traditions being gradually squeezed out and marginalized.

Acknowledgement of the multitude of diverse traditional spiritual practices is an important factor in resisting the historical marginalization imposed by colonial narratives and cultural erasure. African societies can affirm their cultural identity and, importantly, strengthen their cultural pride by reconnecting with their ancestral heritage and traditions. African populations must demand the preservation of their spiritual heritage and question the validity of the Western religious practices imposed on them in previous centuries. So far, in the push for decolonization and the restoration of local heritages, most African leaders and policymakers have performed dismally and, as such, the population must rise to the occasion to demand policies that will shift this pendulum.

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