

# CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIONS IN AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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



Contemporary Perspectives on Religions in  
Africa and the African Diaspora

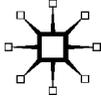
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THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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

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

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# Introduction

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## Contemporary Perspectives on African and African Diaspora Religions

*Carolyn M. Jones Medine and  
Ibigbolade Aderibigbe*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Chapter 1

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

*Ibigholade S. Aderibigbe*

### Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

## African Traditional Religion

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

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

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

## Belief Structure

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

### *(i) Supreme Being*

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

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

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

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

### *(ii) Divinities*

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

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

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

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

### *(iii) Spirits*

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

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

### *(iv) Ancestors*

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