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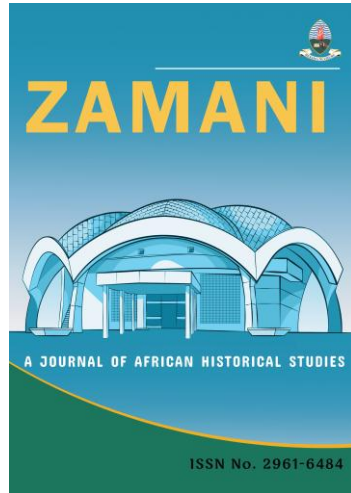
Forum Article: Revisiting African Religion as an Academic Discipline in Africa: History and Prospects

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Revisiting African Religion as an Academic Discipline in Africa: History and Prospects

IVAN B KIVINGE

Abstract

Three main religious traditions—indigenous African beliefs and practices (African religion), Christianity and Islam—have dominated everyday life of communities in Africa today. Scholarship on religion indicates that only African religion originated in Africa—Christianity and Islam are foreign religions. Many Africans today have been active Christians and Muslims, who are sometimes being misleadingly taught that African religion is demonic and forms of paganism. This article employs historical and philosophical approaches to show how the study of African religion has navigated through various historical currents and resultant implications on the way the current generation views it. In the end, the article proposes an impartial approach to the study of African religion. It is premised on the argument that African religion is there to stay, both as an academic discipline and a spiritual entity despite the challenges.

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Introduction

From the eighteenth century, explorers, traders and missionaries produced a plethora of information about African cultures, practices and thought patterns, and made them available to the Western scholars. Diverse information intrigued some social and cultural anthropologists to research and write about African culture.[1] However, these scholars were ignorant of the meanings entailed in African cultures, and accordingly, viewed them in western epistemic and hermeneutic context and

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[1] Eric Ayis, *An Introduction to the Study of African Culture* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1992), xiv.

worldview. Consequently, African culture was viewed as primitive and the Africans as uncivilized, intellectually inferior, irrational and irreligious.[2]

The early western social and cultural anthropologists who studied African religious systems used the term *animism* to refer to African religion. It was popularly used by nineteenth century anthropologists such as Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer. They regarded *animism* as the first phase of the development of religions.[3] Thus, the term *animism* gave the appearance of primitiveness to African religion in comparison to Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Other negative terms which were used to characterize African religion, according to Ray were "fetishism, idolatry, superstition, heathenism, totemism, magic and primitive religion."[4] This characterization of African religion prompted P'Bitek to remark that "the concept of fetishism or animism…were not African religion…There is no such religion as animism in Africa."[5] These remarks by early African thinkers prompted other scholars to start using various approaches to study and understand African religion from various points of view. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, most of the anthropological works classified African religion in terms of belief in spirits.[6] It was followed by polytheism which attracted critics from African scholars particularly Idowu, Mbiti and P'Bitek who emphasized on monotheism of African religion.

By the 1950s, scholars began to characterize African religious systems positively. Anthropologists particularly Edward Evans-Pritchard, Marcel Griaule and the missionary theologian Placide Tempels pioneered the change. They called for integrity of African religious systems while relying on western theological and hermeneutical concepts to interpret it.[7]

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[2] Fidelis Nkomazana and Doreen Setume, Senzokuhle, "Missionary Colonial Mentality and the Expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800 to 1900," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 19 (2016): 29-55.

[3] Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and the Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), xi.

[4] Ray, *African Religions*, xi.

[5] Okot P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970),

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[6] Ray, *African Religions*, xi

[7] Ray, *African Religions*, xii.

The most influential scholars of the immediate postcolonial Africa were Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Okot P'Bitek, Terence Ranger and Isaria Kimambo, to mention just a few examples. They upheld the view that there was a commonality in beliefs and practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. Their major argument was that Africa had known and worshiped the Supreme Being before they encountered Christianity.[8]

Today African religion is recognized as one of the world's religions. However, its recognition has not been easy. More studies are to be pursued to make it known and appreciated by many people in and outside Africa. Geographically, this article is confined to sub-Saharan Africa, thereby excluding peoples of Arab, Indian or European descent and culture. The article extends from eighteenth century when studies on African religion began to be carried out through post-independence Africa.

For many years, African religion was not recognized as a religion by other traditions other than African. The African beliefs and practices that are entailed in African religion were termed as primitive beliefs and practices. According to Lugira, "it took some 300 years for scholars to recognize African religion as a true religion."[9] From 1950s-1960s following the political independence of Ghana and the struggle for independence of other African countries, African religion started to get some recognition as a religion. Political independence made many Africans to return to African roots and start to appreciate things that are African. By this time the Western world also started to greatly appreciate the value of African religion. Other world religions also started to recognize African religion as the partner in the world religions. For example; Lugira points out that:

> In the 1964 Vatican II Council, Roman Catholic bishops from all over the world met in Rome. They accepted African religion as a full partner among world religions. The influence of Vatican II spread well beyond the Catholic Church. Observers from almost all Christian denominations attended and carried its message back to their churches. They also

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[8] Ray, *African Religions*, xii.

[9] Aloysius Lugira, *World Religions: African Traditional Religion*, 3rd edition, edited by O'Brien, Joanne and Palmer, Martin (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 106.

quickly accepted African religion in its many manifestations as a full partner among world religions.[10]

Discourses on 'African Religion'

The term 'African religion' has attracted scholarly attention across time and space. For John Mbiti, religion can be seen in five aspects—beliefs, religious practices, religious objects and places, values and morals and religious officials or leaders.[11] Religion cannot be defined by only one or two of these aspects; they have to be considered together, because religion is a complex phenomenon. Thus, despite all the contestations, mostly from the Western commentators, African religious heritage qualifies the name religion.

Different positions have been held by scholars on the actual name to be given to African religious belief systems. Dopamu observes that:

> The indigenous religion of the Africans has been inconsistently labelled African Traditional Religion (ATR), African Religions, African Indigenous Religion (AIR), African Systems of Thought, Primal Heritage . . . scholars like Parrinder and Mbiti inconsistently used African Traditional Religion and African Religion.[12]

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African religion is often referred to as a traditional religion, one that is spontaneously passed down from generation to generation. The term African traditional religion was recommended by the Abidjan Conference on religions and also used by Parrinder's *African Traditional Religion*. However, this term has been questioned on the ground that Islam and Christianity have both remained long enough in Africa to merit the name as they are also passed down from African generations to generations. In questioning the authenticity of the term African Traditional Religion, Erivwo argues that:

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[10]Lugira, *World Religions*, 107.

[11] John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann International Literature and Textbooks, 1991), 10.

[12] Ade P Dopamu, "African Religion in Nigerian Society: Past, Present and the Future," in *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria*, edited by Razaq D Abubakre et *al* (Ilorin: Christy–David Printers, 1993), 239.

> To deny the term African traditional religion to Islam and Christianity would imply denying either that African adherents of Christianity and Islam who inherited their respective faiths from their parents are Africans, or that Islam or Christianity are African in their present expression.[13]

Erivwo, thus, suggests instead the term 'Indigenous African Religion' to show that African religion originated from Africa, thus it is indigenous to Africa. Nevertheless, what is important is the term 'African' because it distinguishes African religion from other religions which are practiced in Africa. Christianity and Islam cannot be called African religions because both claims to be universal and both originated outside Africa. Thus, in this article the name for African religious heritage will be African religion. It is further necessary to define African religion. Awolalu and Dopamu remark that:

> When we speak of African traditional religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans; it is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature yet it is "written" everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the peoples' myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped. It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young or old.[14]

This definition is very comprehensive as it encompasses all the contents of African religious beliefs and practices. African religion is a vital part of the African heritage, and Africans who live in Africa belong to that heritage.

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[13] Samuel Erivwo, *Alternative Captions for African Religion* (Paper presented at the 5th National Conference of Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions at Ilorin, 1979).

[14] Joseph O Awolalu and Ade P Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Lagos: Macmillan Publishers, 2005), 26–27.

African Religion as an Area of Academic Inquiry

The study of African religion has witnessed a tremendous growth from 1950s to date. Records show its development from a stage of a random collection of strange customs by transient Western explorers and missionaries to the stage where it is now studied as a special subject.[15] Writing on the teaching of African religion at the international level, Omotoye observes that for many years teaching African religion was not allowed at the international levels and even in some African national institutions. African religion was not recognised as one of world's religions. Hence, even papers on African religion were not accepted for presentation in the international academic conferences, as they were deemed non-factual. Thus, it has been a struggle for decades, on the side of scholars of African religion, to make it recognised and accepted as a religion worthy of serious academic attention both at local and international forums.[16]

Recently African religion has become a serious subject of study, attracting academics in the humanities and social sciences. Formerly, students of African studies did not pay attention to it. However, in the recent years, anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, philosophers and religious studies experts have conducted studies that have promoted a better understanding on the subject matter. Lugira observes that following political independence of African states, a growing number of Africans developed a keen awareness of their identity and their religious heritage. Thus, post-colonial African scholars started to study and write about African religion from different perspectives ranging from historical, anthropological to philosophical perspectives. At the international level, some academic institutions such Harvard University and University of California-Berkeley established centres for African Studies in which courses on African religion are offered. Since then, African religion has been gradually gaining popularity in academic circles.[17] Today many

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[15]Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha: IMICO Publishers, 1992), xii.

[16]Rotimi W Omotoye, "Modern Trends in the Teaching of African Religion in the Twenty-First Century: Conceptual Decolonization" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religions in Africa and the African Diaspora,* edited Ibigbolade S Aderibigbe and Carolyn MJ Medine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 30.

[17]Lugira, *World Religions,* 114.

African and non-African academics and students study African religion as a subject alongside Christianity and Islam.[18]

The Approaches of Studying African Religion: A Brief History

Authors on African religion have not yet agreed on a specific approach to studying African religion. The disagreement stems from the fact that systematic study of African religion is plagued by a number of challenges some of which are inherent in the nature of African religion itself, while others derive from historical development of its study. Firstly, African religion unlike Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam has no Scripture. It has neither a written source, nor are its tenets defined and preserved in a collection of books.[19] Different categories of people at different times—missionaries, historians, anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists and theologians—have claimed to be authentic interpreters of African religion and have approached its study in various ways.[20] Secondly, African religion is an ethnic religion. Unlike Christianity and Islam, it has neither founder nor is it a revealed religion. It has grown out of the experiences and practices of the people, who for the most part, live-in small-scale societies and therefore its tenets are tailored to suit the particular needs and situations of each ethnic group.[21] Thirdly, the study of African religion has been, at various stages of its historical development, subject to various historical currents—evolutionism, colonialism, functionalism, African nationalism, etc. Some of these have influenced the methodology and interpretation of African religion.[22]

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Consequently, various authors have adopted diverse and sometimes conflicting approaches to the study of African religion. Aylward Shorter identifies a number of approaches adopted by different authors: "Particularistic Approach, Enumerative Approach, Hypothesis of Unity Approach, Historical Approach, Limited Comparative Approach, Categorical Approach, Thematic Approach and Multi-dimensional Approach."[23] However, some of these approaches overlap and can be

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[18]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies* xi.

[19]Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Philadelphia and Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 4.

[20]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xv.

[21]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative,* xvi.

[22]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xvi.

[23] Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapmans, 1975), 38-58.

considered as emphasis rather than distinct approaches. In this section, a few approaches that have had considerable influence on the historical development of the study of African religion are presented.

Evolutionist Approach

In the nineteenth century, the study of religion was influenced by Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection. According to Darwin and the subsequent evolutionists, societies were said to have been gradually moving towards scientific consciousness after which religion would be entirely gotten rid of. The main contention of most evolutionary writers on religion was that primitive religions lacked theological integrity and awareness.[24] This move had far-reaching effects on the study of African religion as well. Under the influence of evolutionism, the study of religion for the most part concerned itself with the search for the most primitive form of religion, and the stages of its development to its highest form.[25] African religion was very much in focus at this time, not because it was deemed to be worthy studying for its own sake, but because authors believed that examples of primitive forms of religion which they were looking for had survived and would be found in Africa. The use of this approach in studying African religion led to the description of African religion as fetishism, animism, totemism and polytheism. These terms, unfortunately, are still used to designate African religion in some literature about Africa.

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Another legacy left by the evolutionists is the assumption that any higher forms of beliefs, concepts, institutions, art, or any item of culture found in Africa must have been imported from outside Africa. Consequently, all kinds of theories and explanations were put forward on how different religious traits had reached African societies usually from the Middle East or Europe.[26] It is true that Africa south of the Sahara has been in contact with other parts of the world for several centuries. However, the attitude of tracing the outside source of whatever is noble and of some worth in Africa denies Africans any inventive capabilities and renders Africa impotent of any meaningful contribution in global affairs.

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[24]Ayis, *Study of African Culture,* 71.
[25]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xviii.
[26]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xviii-xix.

Evolutionist approach lost its appeal when it was discovered that monotheistic concepts existed side by side with animistic and fetishist beliefs among the so-called primitive peoples. In fact, some authors in the evolutionist camp, like Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Schmidt proposed that monotheism, not fetishism or animism, was the earliest form of religion, and that polytheism, animism and fetishism were later degenerations. This opinion was not popular with the evolutionists. This marked the beginning of the decline of the evolutionist approach in the study of African religion. However, Schmidt's work did focus attention on the significance of the Supreme Being in African religious tradition.[27]

Further, most of evolutionary writers on religion attempted to justify their loss of faith in their own religions.[28] Everything they said and wrote on primitive religion was flavoured with their early religious training and subsequent experiences. The most influential writers who used this approach include Tylor who was brought up as a Quaker; Frazer a Presbyterian; Marett in the Church of England; Malinowski a Catholic; while Durkheim, Levy-Bruhl and Freud had Jewish backgrounds.[29] It is said that because these scholars had lost faith, they were concerned with religious practices only rather than the spiritual content of the so-called primitive religions they were studying. However, what they said, served as working hypothesis for subsequent studies.

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Anthropological Approach
The colonial occupation of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century and the establishment of colonial administration in most parts of Africa created a favourable atmosphere for anthropologists to carry out extensive fieldwork and documentation of traditions, customs, beliefs and practices of the people before they encountered World religions. For this reason, anthropological writings still constitute an important documented source of African religion today.[30] Anthropologists were primarily

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[27]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xix.
[28] Edward Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 7.
[29]Ayis, *Study of African Culture,* 72.
[30] Newell Booth, ed., *African Religions* (New York: Nok Publishers, 1977), 2-3.

concerned with the study of small-scale societies. They studied religion as one of the many cultural items in each small-scale society.

Approach to the study of African religion by social anthropologists has been described by Shorter as being particularistic, insisting on a thoroughgoing study of each and every ethnic group and professing in almost total agnosticism in respect of any similarities or links between them.[31] On the one hand, this particularistic approach has shed new light on the various symbols, values, significance and functions of different traditional beliefs. On the other hand, the refusal of many anthropologists to go beyond particularism, and their insistence on seeing religious beliefs only through the binoculars of their social and psychological functions, has given rise to reductionism—reducing African religion to merely psychological, sociological or political devices.[32] The anthropological approach also focused on describing how Africans believed and engaged in religious practices without either searching for underlying principles or questioning such beliefs and practices. This descriptive way of presenting findings influenced African scholars such Mbiti and Idowu who used descriptive approach in their writings and have been criticized by some scholars for that.

A move within the anthropologists' camp initiated by Edward Evans-Pritchard sought to counter balance particularism with a comparative approach, and functionalism with a quest for meaning. The comparative approach presumed the study of philosophy that is the meaning of the religious beliefs and practices of each group as a system of ideas and practices in its own right.[33]

Philosophical Approach

In contrast to the early anthropologists who focused on the social order and studied African religion from the point of view of its functions in the social order, philosophers focused on the symbolic-philosophical order and regarded this as the determinant of both social structure and other aspects of African life—their law, religion, ethics, psychology,

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[31] Shorter, *Christian Theology*, 39.
[32] Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xx.
[33] Edward Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 315.

epistemology and cosmology.[34] The approach sought to demonstrate that African religious systems formed coherent systems of ideas and practices, supported by an underlying world-view. In pursuit of this thinking, philosophers made great advances in explicating African cosmological systems and the philosophy implicit in African belief systems. Thus, Griaule discovered a fascinating cosmogony and a set of cosmological ideas among the Dogon people of Mali which shape their beliefs and habits. This led Griaule to conclude that in fact, the Dogon live by a cosmogony, metaphysics and a religion which Christian theology might indeed study with profit. The approaches and conclusions of philosophers and anthropologists are so diverse that one is sometimes inclined to inquire how far the assumptions and approach of each group influenced their findings.[35]

Some authors, subscribing to philosophical tradition, have identified the unifying-foundational principle underlying African religious systems. The most influential of these attempts is Placide Tempels' use of the concept of 'Vital Force' which he claims to be an authentic African concept to explain every aspect of their life and beliefs—their psychology, epistemology, ethics, and jurisprudence as well as their religious beliefs. For Tempels, African religion is founded on the metaphysical principle 'The Vital Force'[36] of which the source is God. He holds the view that "what has been called magic, animism, ancestor-worship, or dynamism—in short, all the customs of the Bantu depend upon a single principle, knowledge of the Inmost Nature of beings, that is to say, upon their

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[34]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xx.

[35]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xxi.

[36] It is traditionally construed as an invisible divine energy that permeates everything in the world in varying degrees. The 'inanimate' mineral kingdom has the least degree of life-force; plants have more than rocks; animals have more than plants; humans have more than animals; ancestors and other disembodied and imperceptible ('spiritual') agents have more than humans; and God, as the source of all life-force, has more than anything else. See Thaddeus Metz, "The Virtues of African Ethics," in *African Ethics: A Guide to Key Ideas* edited by Jonathan O Chimakonam and Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 190.

Ontological Principle."[37] Commenting on Tempels' thoughts Metz holds that:

> Life-force . . . is an invisible energy that permeates everything in the world in varying degrees. The 'inanimate' mineral kingdom has the least degree of life-force; plants have more than rocks; animals have more than plants; humans have more than animals; ancestors and other imperceptible agents have more than humans; and God, as the source of all life-force, has more than anything else.[38]

The vital force entails three aspects—supernaturalism, community and vitality. The beings constituting the vital force are the sources of religious beliefs, ethical values and sanctions. At the top of the hierarchy of all vital forces is God, the Supreme Force. Next come deities, then ancestor founders of the clan. Then comes human beings, followed by animals, trees and mineral forces. Beings are linked to one another by a network of relationships. Harmonious interaction of beings results in the mutual strengthening of their vital forces while any pernicious influence emitted by any of the forces results in evil.

Similarly, Alexis Kagame employed the philosophical approach in studying African religion. He used the Aristotelian categories to classify African concepts of being.[39] He retained Temple's basic concept that essence of being is force "Ntu" and identified four categories of *Ntu*(forces) – *Mu-ntu* forces endowed with intelligence and will like God, Spirits, human being; *Ki-ntu,* visible beings without intelligence like animals, trees and minerals; *Ha-ntu*, beings of space and time category; and *Ku-ntu*, modality or qualities of being like beauty, happiness and size.[40] Kagame's theory like that of Tempels was inspired by Western philosophy particularly Aristotle.[41]

In the last three decades, notable advances in the study of African philosophy of religion have been made. Currently the attempts to employ

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[37]Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. King C. (Brussels: Presence Africaine, 1959), 33.

[38]Taddeus Metz, "An overview of African ethics" in *Themes, issues and problems in African philosophy,* edited by Isaac E. Ukpokolo (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 68.

[39]Alexis Kagame, *La Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de L᾽ Etre* (Brussels: Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1956), 36

[40] Kagame, *La Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise,* 34-41.

[41]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xxii.

philosophical approach to the study of African religion has centred on the debate concerning fundamental concepts in the African religion—God, other supernatural entities and the problem of evil. The concept of God in African scholarship on religion has produced two conflicting views: 'African theistic view 'and the 'limited God view'.[42] These two views significantly disagree on the nature of God, nonetheless they both agree that God is a real being. Discourse on the African ethics has attracted debates on the problem of good and evil, and the foundation of African ethics with some commentators arguing for supernatural foundation and the others arguing for humanistic foundation whereas others take intermediate position.

The proponents of the 'African theistic view who view God as immaterial, eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good are Gyekye, Tutu, Njoku, Metz and Molefe. The proponents of the 'limited God view', who contrast with the theistic view, are Bewaji, Oladipo, Balogun, and Wiredu. These scholars regard God as having limited power, knowledge and goodness.[43]They deny God's moral perfection since, they argue, in the world there are both good and evil. Therefore, if God was all good, evil would have no place on earth because evil could neither be created by a perfectly good Being nor could this Perfect Being allow it to exist. They argue that the superlative qualities of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and omni-benevolence often ascribed to God are imported by Christians in an attempt to prove to the West that Africans view God as Christians do. They, therefore, argue that the theistic view misrepresent the authentic African view.[44] The main argument is that in African religion God is limited since a lived experience shows that many African acknowledge other powers—divinities, ancestors, magic and witchcraft and that some of these powers are acknowledged as ends in themselves.[45]

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[42] Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ada Agada, "African Philosophy of Religion: Concepts of God, Ancestors, and the Problem of Evil," *Philosophy Compass* 17 (2022): 1-11.

[43] Ada Agada, "Bewaji and Fayemi on God, Omnipotence and Evil," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy*, *Culture and Religions* 11 (2022): 41–56.

[44] Authentic in this sense means a form of pre-colonial epistemic structure which has not been influenced by foreign culture/non-western African culture.

[45] Olusegun Oladipo, "Religion in African Culture: Some Conceptual Issues." In *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Wiredu, Kwasi (New York: Blackwell, 2004), 360.

In the Yoruba religious text, the Ifa Corpus for instance, Bewaji notes that, God is sometimes depicted as seeking knowledge from lesser deities and even from human beings indicating that he is not all-knowing.[46] For these scholars, "the predominant belief in the existence of lesser deities in traditional African societies indicates that there is no one Supreme Being corresponding to the Christian God, since many gods inhabit the African universe of spiritual entities."[47] Thus, for the proponents of a limited God view, the concept of God propagated by the theistic view is a misguided attempt to equate African religion with Christianity.

The other debate in African philosophy of religion that has dominated the intellectual circles in the last three decades concerns the problem of good and evil, and the foundation of African ethics with some African philosophers arguing for supernaturalism as the foundation. These scholars invoke God, ancestors and divinities as the source (s) of ethical sanctions or rules and the agent(s) or power(s) responsible for enforcing morality. For Tutu, for instance, the greatest good is social harmony. He notes that: "Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods".[48] Since for Tutu morality comes from God, it implies that God is a source of social harmony. This means that for Tutu antisocial behaviour is immoral and ungodly. However, other African scholars argue for humanistic foundation of ethics. These scholars invoke at least three major reasons. The first objection to religious ethics argues that African ethics is not superstitious rather it is rational. The second objection holds the view that ethical supernaturalism is incompatible with the utilitarian approach to religion that typically characterizes some African peoples' orientation to it. The last objection argues that religious ethics by its very nature requires the revelation, which is generally lacking in African religious experiences since African religion is neither a revealed religion nor does it have a founder.[49] Regarding the problem of evil, the African theistic view treats evil as a result of free will with which human beings and spiritual entities are

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[46] John AI Bewaji, "Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil" In *African Studies Quarterly* 2(1998): 1–17.

[47] Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada, "African Philosophy of Religion," 3.

[48] Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 35.

[49] Motsamai Molefe, "African Metaphysics and Religious Ethics," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 7 (2018):19-37.

endowed. The limited God view, in contrast, argues that evil is part of the cosmic order created by an imperfect being who sometimes does evil as well by, for instance, inflicting suffering to people and animals. Thus, the philosophical approach as it has been demonstrated involves an inquiry into the ultimate principles underlying reality in order to build up a belief system and the system of values by which African societies operate.

Descriptive Approach
This approach attempts to make a systematic presentation of African religion by describing its major tenets as found in different African societies. The description centres on the main items of beliefs common to most African societies—the Supreme Being, the Deities, Ancestors, rituals, and the system of morality. However, variations and divergences of the beliefs are pointed out where they exist. Representatives of this approach include such names as Parrinder in his famous books *African Traditional Religion* and *Religion in Africa*, Mbiti in his *African Religions and Philosophy* and Deschamps in his book *Les Religions De L'Afrique Noire*. Mbiti's description of his method is typical of this approach. "My approach here is chiefly descriptive and interpretive, bringing together in a comparative way those elements which are representative of traditional religions from all over Africa.[50] The weakness of this approach is that it over-ambitiously attempts to cover too many societies and too many religious phenomena. Mbiti, for instance, reviewing widespread belief in God's nature across various African cultures, notes: "Some of the people of Zaire say, 'Rejoice, God never does wrong to people!' And in Liberia they say, 'God causes rain to pour down on our fields, and the sun to shine…In Ghana people look at the works of God and proclaim, 'God is good, because he has never withdrawn from us the good things which he gave us!'[51].This weakens his attempts of making comparisons, and he often ends up making enumeration of different items of beliefs and traditions from a large collection of societies. Furthermore, this approach has been criticized for ignoring the socio-cultural contexts and the historical dimensions of African religion.

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[50]Mbiti, *African Religions*, 5.
[51]Mbiti, *African Religions*, 49.

Historical Approach

The neglect of the historical dimension of African religion was not restricted to the Western scholars of African religion, in fact until recently, most scholars on African religion including African scholars, such as Mbiti and Idowu who used descriptive approach, paid very little attention to the historical aspect. This is partly due to the anthropological bias against history, but more so because of the lack of documentary sources and archaeological materials to support their studies. No writer would of course deny that African religion has a history—the question was whether it could be known. About this many writers like Evans-Pritchard were sceptical:

> Nuer religion, like any other, has of course a history, but we can only trace it in so far as it survives in the memories of the Nuer themselves, for reports by travellers, which started barely a century ago, are on this matter slight and unreliable.[52]

Consequently, most anthropological and descriptive accounts continued to present an image of an African religion that was not subject to historical changes. Some African scholars in collaboration with some American colleagues organized series of conferences on the historical study of African religion. The result of their research was published in the book *The Historical Study of African Religion* edited by Ranger and Kimambo in 1972. By combining the use of oral history, more recent political history and contemporary socio-religious analysis, they were able to show that there was a high degree of cultural interaction between different African ethnic groups, and this resulted in the introduction of new cults and the modification of existing ones.[53]

Challenges Facing the Study of African Religion

Notwithstanding efforts to study African religion across time and space, it faces numerous challenges. First, lack of written documents presents a

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[52] Evans-Pritchard, *Neuer Religion,* 311.
[53] Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions,* xxii-xxiii.

more formidable challenge because the majority of Africans were non-literate and so could not document the available information for posterity.[54] Secrecy in the attitude of practitioners of religion also contributes to the unavailability of African religious information. Consequently, many of them would die without availing the necessary information to their progeny.[55] Scholars are in some places prevented from accessing necessary information needed for their research. Most especially, women researchers and uninitiated are not permitted to enter certain shrines and groves.

Second, Africa as a continent is too vast in terms of land mass to cover for any study on African religion. This may be considered one of the challenges that confronted early scholars.[56] In Tanzania alone, there are a multitude of different languages and cultures. Due to the vastness of Africa, early scholars made unclaimed, unsubstantiated, and generalized conclusions about the African religion. Some of those unsubstantiated conclusions were: Africans were heathens and almost irreligious, there was total absence of religious structures and concept of a Supreme Being in African societies[57]

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Third, the introduction of Christianity and Islam in Africa has had a negative impact on the study of African religion. Propagators of these religions indoctrinated the African converts and caused them to lose interest in the religion of their forefathers.[58] Many Africans who are supposed to be future priests and priestesses of African divinities are now founders of churches and pastors in the churches. They are trained to condemn African religion as demonic and traditional rituals as backward.

Fourth, Western education has caused the educated Africans to view African religion as religion of the uneducated and uncivilized. As such, they prefer to be associated with foreign religions. The pursuit of a higher education has led most educated Africans to leave their countries in

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[54]Ajay B Jacobs, *A Textbook on West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Aromolaran Publishing Company, 1977), 13–14.

[55]Omotoye, "Teaching of African Religion", 35.

[56]Omotoye, "Teaching of African Religion", 35.

[57] Nkomazana and Senzokuhle, "Missionary Colonial Mentality," 29-55.

[58] Joseph O Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1975), 183–96.

pursuit of 'greener pasture' outside Africa. The development of towns and cities has eventually led to the destruction of shrines and other African religious objects.[59]

Finally, the introduction of Western medicine has prompted educated Africans to condemn African medicine. As such, soon as Western education was introduced, Western medical facilities were provided by the Christian missionaries. Medical facilities were put in place, and medical personnel were availed. This effort has led those who subscribe to Western medicine to condemn African medicine as non-effective, magic and consequently unacceptable.[60]

Prospects of African Religion as an Academic Discipline

While acknowledging numerous challenges over the continuity of African religion, the future of African religion can be seen. This is evident in a number of factors, including increased studies in African religion in Africa and globally. A plethora of books on African religion have been, and are being written. Also, conferences, symposia, workshops and other forms of scholarly meetings are being conducted on the themes based on African religion.[61] Omotoye, writing about teaching African religion in Nigeria, attests that:

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> Today, African religion is being taught in almost all of the Nigerian universities and colleges of education where there is a Department of Religions…certificates are awarded in Comparative Religious Studies at the degree, Masters, and PhD programs. The focus is on African Religion. One of the recommended literatures for university students is a book written by Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*.[62]

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[59]Omotoye, "Modern Trends in the Teaching of African Religion in the Twenty-First Century: Conceptual Decolonization", 35.

[60]Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites,* 183-96.

[61]Ibigbolade S Aderibigbe, "Religious Traditions in Africa: An Overview of Origins, Basic Beliefs, and Practices" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religions in Africa and the African Diaspora*, edited by Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe and Carolyn MJ Medine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 17-18.

[62]Omotoye, "Modern Trends in the Teaching of African Religion in the Twenty-First Century," 33.

Documentaries on African religion have also been prepared by some globally known media. In 2020, *BBC News Africa* started to broadcast a documentary titled 'Ancestors, Spirits and God-History of Africa with Zeinab Badawi. In the department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Dar es salaam the course on African Religion has been proposed both at undergraduate and post-graduate levels and it will start to be offered soon after approval by the relevant authorities. Moreover, many Africans today show commitment to the search for African identity. African religion as the core of African culture is being upheld to meet this objective. Furthermore, even with the conversion of some Africans to other religions the indigenous practices continue to be observed as cultural values in their everyday engagements. Through enculturation, African religious values have been intermingled with the practices of other religions on the African continent to the extent that the practices of these religions in Africa today are not in the original form in which they were introduced into the continent—Christianity and Islam have been indigenized in Africa.[63]

Regarding the methodology, the methods which are proposed for the current and future scholarship in African religion are phenomenology and thematic comparative approach. Phenomenology as a philosophical method simply means letting the phenomena speak by themselves. There are three most important concepts found within the phenomenology—*epoché*, empathetic interpolation and the eidetic intuition.[64] Coined by German philosopher Edmund Husserl, the term *epoché* was used by him to mean suspending all judgments associated with material reality, science, other humans, and the sequence and order of events. All the things we take for granted about what we perceive as real, must be put into brackets. In solving algebraic equations, for example, the mathematician places the various components of the formula into brackets and works on solving each problem placed in brackets one at a time so that, at the conclusion, each limited solution can be applied to resolving the problem of the entire

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[63]Aderibigbe, "Religious Traditions in Africa," 18.
[64] James L Cox, "Methodological Perspectives on African Religions" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, edited by Elias Kifon Bongmba (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2012), 26.

equation.[65] In a similar way scholars of African religion ought to suspend judgments about it and other known religions so that attention can be focused on the analysis of the phenomena of African religion as it appears in the scholar's consciousness.

A second key concept in the phenomenological method, as outlined by van der Leeuw, concerns sympathetic interpolation. Sympathetic interpolation not only requires the active involvement of the researcher but also includes the acts of a believing community—what it intends by its myths, rituals, and symbols—which must be apprehended by the researcher if genuine understanding is to be achieved.[66] It enables the scholar to access the meaning of the religious life and practices for adherents and then make sense of them intentionally in terms of the researcher's own culture. Smith provides examples of sympathetic interpolation by selecting key symbols which he used to help interpret to outsiders the meaning of faith for adherents within four different religious and cultural traditions—Hindus, Buddhists, the Chinese and Muslims.[67] Under this procedure it is irrelevant whether or not scholars of religion are able to endorse the beliefs and practices of the communities they are seeking to understand.

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A third key concept in the phenomenological method is the 'eidetic intuition'. Again, this idea is obtained from Husserl who uses the phrase, which he derived from the Greek *eidos* meaning form, idea, or essence, to see into the meaning of the phenomena encountered while in the state of bracketed consciousness or *epoché*.[68] By the 'eidetic intuition' Husserl means that the observer is able to apprehend not just particular entities or even universal classes of entities but their essential meanings as entities and classes of entities.[69] This can occur only when one's preconceived opinions are suspended, thereby enabling the researcher to intuit the meaning of what actually manifests itself in the world. Husserl elucidates that "the multiplicity of possible perceptions, memories, and indeed,

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[65] Cox, "Perspectives on African Religions," 26.

[66] Cox, "Perspectives on African Religions," 27.

[67] Wilfred C Smith, *Patterns of Faith around the World* (Oxford and Boston: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 35-48.

[68] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, translated by WRB Gibson (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1931), 111.

[69] Cox, "Perspectives on African Religions," 29.

intentional processes of whatever sort, that relate, or can relate, harmoniously to one and the same physical thing has a quite definite essential style".[70] For Husserl, the combination of *epoché* and the eidetic intuition are required for the building up of an objective picture of the phenomena of existence. *Epoché* allows the observer to suspend theories of the world built on naturalistic assumptions in order that consciousness, which forms the basis for all knowledge, can be analysed rigorously.[71]In this way, the scholar perceives religion as it presents itself and is able thereby to comprehensively understand a particular religion as it is in itself without prejudice.

The net effect of this method is to establish a new mode of consciousness in which the preconceived notions are put out of focus. By placing in brackets previously held beliefs or assumptions derived from the religious teachings, the scholar allows pure religious phenomena to speak for themselves. This method—a method of bracketing out or suspending a researcher's previous ideas, thoughts or beliefs about the truth, value or meaning of any religion under study should be endorsed in the study of African religion. The method will enable scholars to observe the phenomena of African religion as they present themselves, rather than as they are understood through opinions formed prior to their being observed. This means suspending personal beliefs and withholding preconceived judgements on already established academic theories about religion.

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Another approach which can be relevant to studying African religion is comparative thematic approach. The approach seeks to remedy some of the short-comings in the study of African religion such as trying to cover the whole of Africa with too many themes. This approach delimits the wide scope by concentrating on a geographical or cultural region and specific themes. Geographical continuity, environmental and cultural affinity facilitate the comparative work and is more likely to lead to conclusions about the functional interactions of peoples.[72]

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[70] Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, translated by D Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969 [1929]), 246.
[71] Cox, "Perspectives on African Religions", 29.
[72]Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies,* xxiv.

The thematic approach aims to limit the scope by selecting specific themes and studying them in depth, in the contexts of two or three societies, and comparing the findings in order to identify the similar and dissimilar features. In other words, each theme is developed and illustrated with examples drawn from two or three societies whose beliefs on the subject have received a thorough study. This approach allows scholars to discuss each theme in its various dimensions, and at the same time, drawing examples from all over Africa.

Conclusion

It is evident that 'African religion', indigenous to Africans, has passed through a number of epochs in its development as an area of academic inquiry. Indeed, African religion has been studied with varying viewpoints and across time and space. This article holds the position that African religion should be studied in its own right, and not as a preparation for Christianity or as a base on which all religious beliefs are constructed. If we accord other religions the dignity of studying their histories, oral or written traditions—rituals and beliefs in their own right and not as a subset of another tradition, then we ought to do the same with African religion. African religion ought also to be used as the basis of African socio-ethical fabric.

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