



Jumuga Journal of Education,  
Oral Studies, and Human Sciences (JJEOSHS)  
[editor@jumugajournal.org](mailto:editor@jumugajournal.org)  
<http://www.jumugajournal.org>  
Volume 7, No. 1, 2024  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35544/jjeoshs.v7i1.64>

## **African Religion in our Contemporary Society: A Socio-Political Perspective**

**Jane Kathure Muthuri**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9018-2360?lang=en>

The International Leadership University (I.L.U., Kenya)

### **Abstract**

Characteristically, African Religion is a resilient enterprise that cuts across centuries of interaction with other religions such as Christianity and Islam. This research article sets out to unveil its resilient characteristics, as it underlines the fact that it is part and parcel of the African cultural heritage. Methodologically, it highlights the multi-dimensional ways in which the African Religion has permeated into the lives of Africans to date. In the context of Christianity and Islam, it has remained a 'controversial' area of research among theologians, as some fail to understand its relevance. On the flip-side, there are other scholars who contends that it needs to be recognized as an independent and self-fulfilling religion, just as it is the case with Christianity, Islam, and other world religions. To address the divergent views, an application of an *Afro-Biblical Dialogue*, as a theory, has been proposed to address this development. As the dialogical methodology, this model which was first adopted by the Jerusalem Christian Council in the wake of Hellenism (Acts 15), will thus attempt to answer the question regarding the place of Gentiles who became Christians. Were they meant to abandon their religio-cultural backgrounds?

**Key words:** African religion, Christianity, Cultural heritage, Economics, Politics, Resilience

### **Introduction**

African Religion, which permeates in all spheres of African life, is characteristically resilient. Its perpetual nature places it in a prominent position such that it is difficult to drop it from the list of world religions. There are many aspects of the African Religion that are embedded into the lives of Africans. It can be rightly said that an intertwine exists between the African Religion and the socio-economic political realities of Africans. Even after its interaction with Christianity, African Religion has not become extinct among the indigenous peoples. Richard J. Gehman uses the theory of continuity and discontinuity to explain this fact; "By *continuity*, we mean the belief that all religions contain divine revelation and are a means of salvation, though Christianity may be recognized as 'final' and 'superior'. The relationship between African Religion and Christianity is that of imperfect-perfect, ordinary-extraordinary, preparation-fulfillment."<sup>1</sup> He further acknowledges the independent existence of the African Religion, thus: "By *discontinuity*, we refer to the belief that a near total disconnect prevails between

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<sup>1</sup> Gehman, Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Illinois: Oasis International Limited, 1989), 367.

African Religion and Christianity; that salvation cannot be found in [African Religion] but only through Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that Richard J. Gehman observes that Christianity found African Religion as a pathway for its spread among Africans; and "*Continuity* with African Religion demonstrates God's love in preparing the way for the gospel. *Discontinuity* demonstrates the extraordinary grace of God in redeeming a people out of spiritual darkness."<sup>3</sup>

For a long time, many scholars have hesitated to recognize African Religion as a religion like any other world religions. They considered it archaic and a collection of African religious sects. However, as African nations gained political independence, they gradually won in their push for freedom in religion as well. Aloysius M. Lugira expresses this scenario;

It took some 300 years for scholars to recognize African religion as a true religion. At first, they called African beliefs and practices "primitive religion." This term recognized African beliefs as valid, yet "primitive" suggesting something crude and unformed, whereas African religious practices were often highly refined. Eventually, the religions of Africa came to be known simply as "African religion." In 1957 Ghana in West Africa shook off the shackles of colonialism and became independent. This began a general movement toward independence in Africa. Political independence meant a return to African roots and a new appreciation of things African. It restored the "Africanness" of the African people. One outcome was that African religion experienced a comeback. By this time, too, the Western world had come to a greater appreciation and understanding of the value of African religion.<sup>4</sup>

Although the words of Lugira are valid, Africans cannot claim that their religion is free of influence from other religions, as in the case of Islam and Christianity. This research article has developed this argument further.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

The article adopts the analytical-descriptive design. It relies mainly on published works or existing literature. The arguments on what various authors have said, either against or for the African Religion, are developed from a Christian-Biblical perspective. Application, conclusion, and recommendations in this research article are directed to Interreligious Studies (Dialogue), the field of theology under which the article falls.

### **African Religion in Social Life Today**

The social lives of Africans have to do with their beliefs, and interaction among themselves as well as with other communities. According to Tite Tienou, it is advisable to treat Africans as people of a unique religion, requiring a tailor-made approach when reaching out to them with the Christian gospel;

Regardless of what word we use, the problem is with us: Africa is not Europe, Europe is not America, America is not Asia! Even in those continents, there are various 'settings.' This simple fact leads us to the question of how to make the Christian message take hold in different situations. This is quite legitimate. People are different even though there are some basic similarities among them. One cannot, therefore, take 'Biblical Theology and apply it anywhere! A contextual approach whether or not we like the word, is needed and in fact has always applied (with more or less awareness and forcefulness) in Christian theology. The question is how do we prevent contextualization from leading to heresy? A right contextual approach takes seriously both the biblical text and the cultural context where the message is given... All the discussion about Christianity and African culture, Christianity and African Religion, African Theology, and Contextualization spring from attempts to make Christianity more relevant to the African situation.<sup>5</sup>

Tite Tienou's view is that contextualization of the Christian gospel in Africa should not be mistaken for localization of African theology- African Religion can be practiced and studied internationally;

The expression 'African Theology' is an ambiguous one Much of what is currently being called by the name is but ethno-theology. It is as if there is an attempt to write the theology of the encounters which the African peoples had with God. If this is what we mean, let us say so! But misunderstanding develops because most people who hear the word 'theology' think of *Christian* theology. This is quite understandable, even though Christianity has no exclusive right to the word 'theology'. We may speak of Muslim theology, of Hindu theology, of Buddhist theology; these may or may not be ethnic in nature. It is quite another thing when we speak of African

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid 369

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 372

<sup>4</sup> Aloysius M. Lugira, *World Religions: African Traditional Religions* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Tite Tienou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa* (Accra: Africa Christian Press, 1982), 27, 28.

theology: the ethnic nature is definitely what one has in mind. Nevertheless, some of African theology is interested in accommodating Christianity to African religion.<sup>6</sup>

The expression above by Tite Tienou confirms the view of many scholars that, just as in the other world religions, African Religion has been influenced by other religions and vice versa. Martin Ott echoes this idea by distinguishing related terms;

Enculturation describes the process of acquisition of culture by an individual. In that sense, enculturation is very closely related to primary socialization. Acculturation means any encounter by an encultured person with another culture; it is related to secondary socialization and implies that a deliberate or accidental exchange of cultural elements occurs. To sum up: *enculturation*, *acculturation*, and *inter-culturation* are sociological terms; *inculturation*, by contrast, is a theological term. *Enculturation*, *acculturation*, and *inter-culturation* enter in various ways into the process of *inculturation*, but no one of them, in and of itself is equivalent to *inculturation*.<sup>7</sup>

In his endeavor to explain the impact that the African Religion and other religions have had on each other, Martin Ott explains the exceptions of this influence;

Inculturation is not to be equated with *indigenization*, *adaptation*, *accommodation*, or *assimilation*. Each of these terms refers to a certain 'style' or 'flavor' or 'specific approach' in the process of acculturation. Because these four terms are, in fact, sociological they do not express adequately the theological content of the term *inculturation*. Hence those authors who prioritize one or another of these four concepts in developing their theology of inculturation, very often end up with similar results. All of these concepts, taken literally, suggest an ultimate distinction between an unchangeable substance (the so-called "kernel" of the gospel) and a changeable form (the culture in which it is preached) ... Neither is inculturation to be equated with the notions of *contextuality* or *contextualization*. With the increasing awareness of the diversity of religions, worldviews, philosophies, cultures, political models, and social systems, each with its shape and language, theological questions and answers are now seen to be situated in the historical social context.<sup>8</sup>

The study of the impact of the African Religion on the lives of Africans cannot be done without mentioning its significance to Christianity in Africa. That is why Martin Ott goes ahead to define incarnation concerning the African Religion;

In the end, of course, incarnation remains a wider concept than inculturation. The latter is only one of many patterns, which express the mystery of incarnation for Christians. We suggest that the incarnation approach can be exceedingly fertile for the mission, but we also call attention to the fact that the limitations of this analogy are reached when every attempt at inculturation is considered to be a kind of *Christus prolongatus* (extension of Christ himself). The distinction between Christ and his Church that is of incarnation and inculturation must always be borne in mind.<sup>9</sup>

The African Religion is mainly transmitted orally from generation to generation. The oral tradition dominates its existence or continuity as Martin Ott puts it; "Traditional societies in Africa do not emphasize the written word. For them, the spoken word is of primary importance. For this reason, however, scientific anthropology is obliged to document oral sources again and again in an attempt to arrive at their "original" forms."<sup>10</sup> The oral nature of the African Religion is reflected in the lives of Africans in that Africans who write or research on it are few.

Martin Ott stresses that the aesthetic features and meaning symbolically expressed in African Religious art should not be altered even in foreign contexts;

The aesthetic view, on the other hand, has its own limitations. When African art is and/or analyzed in European and American museums and collections, it is not only disconnected from its *sitz im leben* (life context) but also subjected to interpretation by aesthetic principles, which, by reason of their alien origin, are often irrelevant to the work under consideration. In this case African masterpieces are reduced to the function of impressing a Western "elite", whereas in their place of origin their function would be perceived quite differently; indeed, in its African context, the word "art" might never be applied to the very same object.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid 26

<sup>7</sup> Martin Ott, *African Theologies in Images* (Blantyre: Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 2000), 24, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 26, 27

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 55

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 121

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 122

The reason for preserving the aesthetic and symbolic meaning of art in the African Religion is that it is most relevant when in its original form, it permeates through the lives of Africans and manages to find expression even in other religions. As Martin Ott puts it, this Africa religious visual art manifests in the form of; "music, dance, liturgy, ecclesial language, and theology."<sup>12</sup>

All religions are often faced with challenges that threaten their unity and existence. African religion has also experienced divisions emanating from ethnic differences. Jesse Mugambi highlights these divisions witnessed in various religions, which he refers to as schism;

An example of schism can be noted in Judaism during the time of Jesus. There were several parties each with a distinct identity – The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the Zealots, the Essenes, etc. When Jesus started his public ministry, it was thought that his movement was another schism in Judaism. However, it evolved into a distinct religion, which challenged both Judaism and other religious traditions. Islam also has schism, the main ones being the Shia and Sunni orientations. Schisms in Hinduism led to the establishment of oriental religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Buddhism also has two main orientations, Mahayana and Theravada. These examples indicate that forecasting the future of religion in general or of any particular religion, is made difficult by our inability to determine whether and when exactly, another schism is likely to occur.<sup>13</sup>

Jesse Mugambi equally sees such differences amongst sects of the African religion as an hindrance to its systematic study. The same case applies to the other religions mentioned above as he further explains; "It would be easier to propose a forecast if there was only one religion in the world. However, there are numerous religions with a wide variety of teachings, practices, rituals and organizational structures. This plurality makes generalization about religions difficult, although the religious concern may be observed in all cultural traditions."<sup>14</sup>

The African religious life is aligned to the natural cycle of the planting and harvesting seasons. Similarly; Africans believe in the existence of spirits, divinities and the supreme being as elaborated by Joseph Ogbonnaya;

African cosmology is cyclical, based on the agricultural planting and harvesting season. It is a tripartite interdependent world, in which the Supreme Being and the major divinities inhabit the sky; patron gods or nature spirits, like mother earth, inhabit the earth. The ancestral spirits live in the underworld, otherwise called the spirit world. In addition, there also are evil spirits inhabiting the spirit world.<sup>15</sup>

A similar view has been stated by Jacob K. Olupona who reports that ceremonies, festivals and rituals are held in specified seasons with sacrifices and offerings given to the immortal beings mentioned above;

Ceremonies, festivals, and rituals embody, enact, and reinforce the sacred values communicated in myths. Rituals occur on calendrical cycles. They often dictate when the community honors a particular divinity or observes particular taboos. Divinities and ancestors have personalized yearly festivals during which adepts offer sacrificial animals, libations, and favored foods. Such events reinforce the bonds between humanity, ancestors, God, and other deities. They function as modes of communication between humans and spirits. Most significantly, rituals enable supernatural beings to bless individuals and the community with longevity, children, and sustenance. Community rituals may include agricultural rituals designed to persuade the gods to deliver rains and successful harvests and to guarantee healthy livestock. While many rituals involve communal participation, some remain specific to elites whose status, skill, and authority enable them to interact safely and beneficially with sacred powers.<sup>16</sup>

Jacob K. Olupona explains that each religious ceremony in the African religion has ritualistic significance with regards to the various stages of life; birth, naming, initiation, marriage and death. "Rites of passage are rituals marking personal transitions. They coincide with birth and naming, circumcision or coming-of-age initiations, marriage, old age, and death. Each ceremony marks passage from one social status to another. Puberty rites transition a person from childhood to adulthood, when younger members in society learn ancestral knowledge from their elders... Tumdo or "male initiation" among the Nandi of Kenya."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid 135

<sup>13</sup> Jesse Mugambi, *A Comparative Study of Religions* (Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press, 1990), 366, 367.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 365

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Ogbonnaya, *African Perspectives on Culture and World Christianity* (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 56.

<sup>16</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford), 150, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 151, 152

Many communities in Africa conduct initiation for both boys and girls at puberty age. It ushers them to the onset of adulthood. Initiates are usually secluded from the rest of the community as they recover and receive advice on what the community expects of them. Subsequently, they are set free to undertake the next rite of marriage. In his book, *Introduction to African Religion*, John S. Mbiti gives details on the rites of birth, initiation and marriage as well as the significance of each;

Initiation ceremonies for the young people prepare them for the most responsible phase of their life. This is marriage and the raising of families... Marriage is the meeting-point for the three layers of human life according to African Religion. These are the departed, the living and those to be born. The departed come into the picture because they are the roots on whom the living stand. The living are the link between death and life. Those to be born are the buds in the loins of the living, and marriage makes it possible for them to germinate and sprout. If one deliberately refuses to get married it means, therefore, that one is cutting off the vital link between death and life, and destroying the buds which otherwise would sprout and grow on the human tree of life.<sup>18</sup>

Due to the influence of the African Religion, Africans and particularly in Kenya, there are seasonal celebrations such as thanks giving ceremonies in churches, annual anniversary parties both for individuals and institutions, and puberty ceremonies for boys or girls as they move to secondary schools. Religious practitioners and institutions have been known to organize such ceremonies. In some cases, Christians are encouraged to give a thanks giving offering to God. They can be in the form of domestic animals or birds or food crop proceeds from their farms These are then sold and the money channeled back to the religious institution.

It is critically important to appreciate that the pouring of libations is not necessarily done during ceremonies. They were/are offered habitually in households. That is why John S. Mbiti adds;

In many parts of Africa, adult members of the family, and especially the heads of families, pour out beer, water, milk or some other beverage on the ground for the spirits of the family. They may also put bits of food on the ground for the same purpose. In many countries, such as Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and elsewhere, there are often family shrines in the homestead or behind the houses, set apart for remembering the departed. Here kola nuts, coffee beans, blood, beer and other food items are placed, with words to the effect that the food is being given to those who have departed (sometimes mentioning their names). In some areas the placing of foodstuffs is done daily, in others only occasionally.<sup>19</sup>

In his classic book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, John S. Mbiti states that rain is considered a great blessing while thunder and lightning have symbolic meaning in African communities;

Rain is regarded by African peoples to be one of the greatest blessings of God. For that reason, He is commonly referred to as "the Rain Giver." Some peoples, like the Elgeyo, Igbo, Suk, Tonga and others personify rain as a divinity, a supernatural being, or a son of God. Others associate God with rain so closely that the same word (or its cognate) is used for both. For example, the Didinga name for God is Tamukujen and for rain tamu; the Idoma use Owo for both; the Maasai word En-kai is used for both God and rain (or sky); and some of the Suk have llat for both. The Ua and Nuer speak of God as "falling in the rain," yet clearly distinguishing between Him and the rain. Others like the Akamba and Tiv, consider rain to be the saliva of God, this being a symbol of great blessing. Many societies make sacrifices, offerings and prayers to God in connection with rain, especially during periods of drought. Rainmakers are reported in all parts of the continent, their duties being to solicit God's help in providing rain, or in halting it if too much falls. Thunder is taken by many, such as the Bambuti, Bavenda, Ewe and Ha, to be God's voice. Others like the Gikuyu and Zulu interpret it to be the movement of God; and some, like the Yoruba and Tiv, regard thunder as an indication of God's anger. Thunder is personified as a divinity, rooster, bird or other creature, by some including the Abaluyia, Banyoro, Basoga, Tonga and Yoruba. Concepts about lightning are similar to those held about thunder, since these two phenomena are closely associated. The Gikuyu take lightning to be God's weapon by means of which He clears the way when moving from one sacred place to another; the Nuer and Shona believe that God is revealed or manifested in lightning.<sup>20</sup>

John S. Mbiti records that African worship is also characterized by prayers and invocations; "African peoples communicate with God through prayer, pouring out their hearts before Him, at any time and in any place.... Invocations are shortened and common versions of prayers, they are reported everywhere, and show a spontaneous response to God, asking Him to intervene for a particular purpose. For example, they may be in the form of: "God, give us rain!"; "God give you fruit!"; "Help

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<sup>18</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), 98.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 123

<sup>20</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 69.

me O God!"; "God, pity me!" Invocations are usually what the individual prays spontaneously and unceremoniously.<sup>21</sup> There are sacred places of worship in the African religion. These correspond with the synagogues and the temple for the Jews, churches for Christians, and mosques for the Muslims. John Mbiti mentions these sacred places in the African religion that have restricted access and use;

While people do not feel bound to a particular official spot and occasion, there are, however, shrines, temples, altars, groves and other sacred places used particularly for public sacrifices and prayers. Shrines are reported in many societies and vary considerably in appearance and importance. Trees are found at the center of Akamba and Gikuyu shrines; these trees may not be cut down, and the shrines are regarded as a sanctuary for animals and humans alike, so that none may be killed there. Barundi shrines are under special trees, and when people go to worship, they sit down on the leaves of these trees, and then kneel to pray. The shrine may be entered by other people only in the presence or with the permission of the priest of the shrine concerned.<sup>22</sup>

African Religion is anchored on the humanistic philosophy of *Ubuntu*, as quoted by Aloysius M. Lugira;

African religion is deeply and fundamentally humanistic, centered on the human condition. This humanism colors all of life and its relationships. African humanism may be summarized in the principle of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is difficult to translate, but as South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Nobel-Prize-winning churchman, has said, "You know when it is there, and it is obvious when it is absent. It has to do with what it means to be truly human, it refers to gentleness, to compassion, to hospitality, to openness to others, to vulnerability, to be available for others and to know that you are bound up with them in the bundle of life, for a person is only a person through other persons." This is the principle behind African religion. Ultimately this is the principle that empowers African religion to exert worldwide influence.<sup>23</sup>

*Ubuntu* philosophy has also been mentioned as a way of African social life, by David Kirwa. He argues that ethnicity has a positive face for it gives identity to an individual;

Furthermore, ubuntu is a global anthropological truth, in that humans are recognized as social creatures; to be human is to be with others. Thus, the concept of humans as individuals-strictly-in-community occurs in fields not directly linked to African studies. In sociology, the term "social identity" refers to the part of a person's identity shaped by membership in a group. Membership gives an individual a sense of belonging as well as conferring norms of group behavior and values, which the individual will share and conform to, at least to some extent, to be accepted as part of the group. Thus, ethnicity is not a negative reality, but is, in fact, a positive force.<sup>24</sup>

The problem with this humanistic theory is that it exalts the communal strength above God and locks him out altogether. However, it is used positively to foster cohesion among the members of the African Religion. The other challenge that comes with the *Ubuntu* humanistic theory is its incompatibility with capitalism in countries like Kenya especially in the post-modern era where individualism thrives under the umbrella of urbanization. David Kirwa points out that this challenge needs to be addressed; "... there is a need to continually direct African theology towards the ongoing challenges of communal relationships."<sup>25</sup>

Witchcraft is a belief and practice that has persisted in the African worldview. Although it is mostly practiced in secret, some Africans who have converted to Christianity and other religions like Islam have been known to yield to the temptation of reverting to it in the expectation that it can instantly offer solutions to their problems. To this end, Lugira has noted, thus:

Within Africa people have adapted Christian beliefs and rituals to fit their own needs, establishing churches of their own. Many of these churches have strong elements of African religion. People felt that Christianity, with its emphasis on salvation in the next world, was not meeting their needs for the here and now. It did not, for example, offer protection against witches, ways of divining the future, and healing, which the new churches offer. The Aladura Church of Yoruba, with a membership of around 1.5 million, features leaders who act as healers and diviners.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid 84

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 94

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 107

<sup>24</sup> David T. Kirwa, *African Theologies of Identity and Community: The Contributions of John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi, Vincent Mulago, and Kwame Bediako* (Berlin: Gruyter Open, 2017), 306. See also Julius Gathogo, "Some Expressions of African Hospitality Today," *Scriptura* 99 (2008), 275-287.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 317

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 109

Music takes a prominent position in the African Religion. In most cases, it is accompanied by dancing and playing of musical instruments, especially the drum as affirmed by Aloysius M. Lugira; "Music, either vocal or instrumental, usually accompanies African religious ritual. Music is used to praise the Supreme Being, the superhuman beings, and the ancestors. It is used as prayer in African Religion in Today's World. For example, singers would play the drums at a community celebration in Nampula province, northeastern Mozambique... The drum is the primary instrument. It is a key that unlocks communication with the spirit world. People beat or play drums to induce oracles from high above, through mediums."<sup>27</sup> The African Religion members have their activities and conduct regulated by a set of cultural values. Each member of the community has an obligation to abide by these rules, failure to which there are penalties. Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe affirms this obligation;

While it is true that the idea of morality is universal to all human societies in the world, each community has managed to develop ethical systems that resonate with its cultural milieu. For example, in Western societies, the moral order is designed within a cultural setting that caters to the realities of the individual. However, in Africa, morality is rooted in communal values and hardly atomizes the individual from society's collective existence.<sup>28</sup>

It is right to say that one does not have to search for African Religion in Africa. The evidence of its existence is all over, among the Africans and in both the tangible and the intangible areas of their lives. This is clearly stated by Julius Gathogo as quoted by Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe;

Religion in Africa, therefore, permeates the lives of Africans. African religion includes shrines or sacred places and religious objects such as rocks, hills and mountains; Gathogo further describes other primary sources of African religion. The sources include under certain trees, caves and other holy places. Other sources are rituals, ceremonies and festivals of the people (e.g., childbirth, naming, initiation, marriage, funerals, harvest festivals and praying for rain). Incorporated in Gathogo's sources are art and symbols—for example, wood, stools, calabashes, stones, sticks, pots, handicrafts, domestic animals and human bodies, also in masks, wood carvings, ivory and stone, music and dance, proverbs, riddles and wise sayings—names and attributes of people and places, myths and legends. African traditional sources are also found in beliefs and customs. Beliefs cover topics such as God, spirits, birth, death, the hereafter, magic and witchcraft. In all aspects of life, as religion, in the African indigenous context, it permeates throughout the lives of the people<sup>29</sup>

### ***African Religion in the Economic Life Today***

The economic life of Africans is another sphere of life where the impact of African religion has been witnessed. The impact of African Religion on the economic lives of Africans relatively varies with different parts of Africa. The economic development brought about by the African Religion is seen in the eyes of the observer for it depends on one's definition of economic development in relation to the African Religion. Nigel Dower is of a similar view;

This of course raises issues which in one form or another arise at various points in the collection—namely, how far religion is seen as a help or hindrance to development qua economic growth, how far development needs to be defined in non-economic non-materialistic terms, and hence how far religious values themselves are constitutive of genuine development. The authors do not agree on what development is or on how to relate it to religion, but the collection as a whole serves a useful purpose in bringing these issues together.<sup>30</sup>

The question on whether religion contributes to or hinders development has been answered by Yusufu Turaki who sees it as a means to meeting human needs; "Our approach to religion is essentially pragmatic and utilitarian. People want a religion that they can use to meet their needs and provide for their wishes."<sup>31</sup> The challenge with the utilitarian philosophy is that it can easily dismiss the value of the African Religion prematurely. This is by pre-emptying the economic potential of the African Religion even before one carries out a thorough research. After all, the value of a religion is not just economic.

In his *Forum* article tackling the area of *Dialogue between Christianity and African Religion*, John S. Mbiti acknowledges the impact of African Religion on the economic realm of Africa and the socio-political as well;

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid 110, 111

<sup>28</sup> Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe, *The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion* (Bern: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 271.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 429

<sup>30</sup> Nigel Downer, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, *JSTOR*. Vol. 18, Fasc. 2 (Jun., 1988), pp. 196-197 Published by: BRILL Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1580776>, (Aberdeen: BRILL), 196. Accessed 16/11/2023.

<sup>31</sup> Yusufu Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldviews* (Nairobi: Word Alive, 2006), 15.

This second phase of the study of African Religion has reached the point where we see new possibilities. We mention some of them: o Probably the most significant impact has been to treat African Religion on its own merits. It has won a place in the field of world religions and can be subjected to scholarly investigation like other living religions. (Scholars have accumulated sufficient information for it to be recognized as a significant religious phenomenon in African life. It has not been wiped out 174 either by Christianity, Islam or Western ways of life, even though all these have had their impact upon it.) e African Religion is a reality on the African scene which has exercised a tremendous impact on the cultures and mentality of African peoples throughout their history. It is deeply rooted in the psyche of the continent (including Madagascar). Anyone doing business in Africa - whether political, economic, educational, medical, religious or cultural - has to take it into serious consideration. Africa (or the world for that matter) cannot afford to ignore or belittle it anymore.<sup>32</sup>

The commercialization of religion has been going on for many years whenever religion has been viewed as a commodity. This has happened to all religions in the world, African Religion included. Jesse N. K. Mugambi has elaborated on the economic development brought about by the African Religion;

Religion has traditionally been conducted on a voluntary basis. However, commercialization is rapidly increasing as a means of raising money to sustain religious institutions. Another reason for the commercialization of religion is that business and industrial organizations find it relatively easy to advertise goods and services which are directly concomitant with the religious beliefs, practices and traditions of a religious community. The commercialization of the Christian feasts of Christmas and Easter are significant examples. The pilgrimage to Israel, especially to Jerusalem, is also a commercially viable enterprise in some countries, such as the USA. Among Muslims, the pilgrimage to Mecca is not only an important religious observance – it is a major commercial operation. Pilgrimage is one of the significant means of earning national income in Saudi Arabia. Hindus also celebrate Diwali with fireworks and exchange greetings, significant commercial enterprises in countries with large Hindu Communities. In Kenya, the Diwali week is characterized by fireworks during the night, especially in towns. The printing, distribution and marketing of religious literature is a big commercial undertaking. The Bible is the most widely read book in Africa. Translation and printing are expensive operations, which require huge sums of money. In some countries, religious mass communication media are big commercial enterprises. In the USA some radio and television preachers own networks of radio and television stations. Companies advertise their products through these stations, making the owners wealthy even when their teaching is not necessarily of high quality.<sup>33</sup>

The commercialization of religion may be inevitable. However, the taking advantage of a religion's adherents or exploiting them can be considered unethical. In the recent past, innocent Africans have fallen into the hands of scandalous fellows who prey on them in the name of Religion. Self-proclaimed miracle workers and those who overemphasize the prosperity gospel are just some examples in the case. The victims have been reported to lose either money, property or even life. African Theology can be used to liberate Africans from economic oppression. This can be achieved through advanced scholarly work of African Religion as expressed by Joseph Ogbonnaya;

Even though Africa is marginalized in international trade and looked down upon because of the social evolutionism that undergirds world trade and international relations, Christian anthropology has the potential to humanize globalization by putting into practice a globalization of solidarity arising from human interdependence. African countries must liberate themselves from their prevailing crisis of identity preventing them from using their resources for their own development. African Christian theology can contribute to Africa's liberation and development by proffering measures towards implementing the virtues of Ubuntu into Africa's economic, political, social, and educational structures. This could help heal Africa's anthropological poverty, reconstruct Africa, and put the continent and its peoples on the path to holistic development, one that is integral to catering for the vital, social, cultural, religious, and personal values of Africans.<sup>34</sup>

Time is a resource. Just like the African society, African Religion does not emphasize on the future. Its focus is on the past and the present. As the saying goes, there is no hurry in Africa. Majority of Africans live below the poverty line. After all, they only need to have basic needs like food, shelter and clothing. The other reason for lack of aggressiveness is that the future is not so much in their vocabulary. They spend most of their time socializing. Consequently, much valuable time that could have been spent on economic development is wasted. The same case applies to the communal religious activities mentioned earlier in

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<sup>32</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Forum: Challenges Facing Religious Education and Research in Africa; the Case of Dialogue between Christianity and African Religion* (R&T Vol 3/2 (1996) Pp 170-179;173, 174.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 369, 370

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 146

article. Even with the coming of Christianity and Islam, their meetings are prolonged. John S. Mbiti further explains how African Religion underscores the value of the future;

What is taking place now no doubt unfolds the future, but once an event has taken place, it is no longer in the future but in the present and the past. Actual time is therefore what is present and what is past. It moves "backward" rather than "forward"; and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place... We must discuss further time dimensions and their relation- ship with African ontology. Beyond a few months from now, as we have seen, African concept of time is silent and indifferent This means that the future is virtually non-existent as 28 African Religions and Philosophy actual time, apart from the relatively short projection of the present up to two years hence. To avoid the thought associations of the English words past, present and future, I propose to use two Swahili words, "Sasa" and "Zamani."<sup>35</sup>

The social ties in the African Religion are an asset that the members use to meet their economic needs. These needs range from personal expenses like school fees, dowry payment and medical expenses to the communal ones such as the cost for running religious institutions. These shared costs are as per John S. Mbiti's words;

Apart from localizing the sense of kinship, clan systems provide closer human co-operation, especially in times of need. In case of internal conflicts, clan members joined one another to fight their aggressive neighbors, in former years. If a person finds himself in difficulties, it is not unusual for him to call for help from his clan members and other relatives, e.g. in paying fines caused by an accident (such as accidental wounding or killing of another person or damage to property); in finding enough goods to exchange for a wife; or today in giving financial support to students studying in institutes of higher education both at home and abroad.<sup>36</sup>

The dependence syndrome that has arisen among Africans could be due to this economic fabric in the African Religion. It is not unusual to find a few Africans who are economically empowered, burdened in supporting many needy members of their extended families or religious sects. Unfortunately, some of those being supported do not make any effort to become economically independent hence perpetuating the burden of 'Black Tax'. According to Niq Mhlongo, "Many working South Africans in the middle class shoulder the financial burden of supporting their extended family members whereas to some, it is a government responsibility."<sup>37</sup> Although the case in South Africa has had a lot to do with *Ubuntu* and Apartheid, the rest of Africa may be having a similar experience due to Religious *Ubuntu* and unequal distribution of resources. Given the fact that education is an economic resource or a means to earnings, African Religion can be considered to have economic value. The numerous studies that have been conducted both within and outside the continent have brought about development through skills and knowledge. Some researches and education on African Religion have placed many Africans in economically productive positions, where they earn money. Some may teach, conduct research, create content, or publish on African Religion. Bolaji E. Idowu is one of those who affirm this view;

We notice that the new interest in African Traditional Religion is not a phenomenon restricted to Africa. It has become global. 'African Traditional Religion' is finding its way into the curriculum of every higher institution of learning throughout the world; there are European and American professors and lecturers in the field, even though they may never have visited Africa or may have had rather slight contact with the actual scene in any locality in Africa; doctoral these are being written and accepted on the subject almost throughout the world. This interest is not only academic. While the academic interest has moved on from the attitude of the anthropological or sociological curio-collection and is now entering a new phase of seriousness and respect, there is also the deeper interest of those who have come to believe more and more that the religion has satisfying spiritual values to offer.<sup>38</sup>

According John S. Mbiti, a lot wealth lies in African Religion in the form of worship centers, objects and other treasures;

People are ready to spend their wealth on religion People spend a lot of their time and wealth on religion. Some of the most beautiful buildings in the world are or have been religious buildings such as tombs, temples, cathedrals, churches, mosques and other sacred places. In many cities and towns of Africa we find these buildings, some of which have rich treasures of goods and historical objects. Religion must have a great value to people, otherwise they would not continue to spend so much time and wealth on putting up religious buildings, and making and buying so many religious objects.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid 23, 27, 28

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 138

<sup>37</sup> Niq Mhlongo, *Black Tax: Burden or Ubuntu?* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2019)

<sup>38</sup> Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1973), 207.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 195

Similarly, African Herbal Medicine which is tied to African Religion, as administered by medicine men and women, has economic value. Igbolade Aderibigbe identifies herbal medicine as a valuable economic asset in African Religion.

The scenario above finds credence in African Religion which employs African Traditional Medicine for safety, health, and well-being of its adherents. For a long time, Africans have had to rely on African Traditional Medicine as a recipe to their health challenges. This is because orthodox hospitals and other health facilities are either non-existent or in dilapidated shapes and most often, mere consultancy rooms.<sup>40</sup>

Many governments in Africa recognize this skill, Kenya included. For instance, "Centre for Traditional Medicine Research (CTMDR) is a center within Kenya Medical Research (KEMRI)."<sup>41</sup> Without such official regulation, patients in Kenya would not be able to differentiate between an herbalist and a witch. They would also doubt the contents and quantity of the ingredients used in preparation of herbal medicine. In the efforts to have herbal medicine officially regulated in Africa, some universities and other tertiary institutions are involved in research on indigenous herbal medicine. "Kenyatta University is a good example in the case for it has entered into partnership with Shandong University of Traditional Chinese Medicine on this adventure."<sup>42</sup> African governments have been supporting the formation of organizations for traditional herbal medicines in order to promote the quality of these products and services. Aloysius M. Lugira reports on this initiative; "Practically all African countries have taken initiatives to establish organizations and associations through which members of the healing communities may work together, for example by exchanging notes for the material and spiritual well-being of the people. Organizations such as the Uganda Herbalists and Cultural Association in Uganda and the Traditional Doctors' Association in South Africa are two of these."<sup>43</sup> The African Religion has a long history of applying technology in its operations. The use of the horn to pass messages like calling members of the community to assemble for war or alert them of the death of a kin among the Meru community of Kenya is a good example. This technology has progressed in Kenya to date among the Pentecostal churches and Mosques as stated by Julius Gathogo;

Afro-Pentecostal's engagement with science and technology is clearly visible, in both rural and urban Kenya. This was evidentially seen when we consider several pointers to this. First, their powerful loudspeakers that invite people to worship and church services in general, which compares to the Muslims summoning worshippers to the Mosque (Adhan) for obligatory (fard) prayer (salah).<sup>44</sup>

The application of science and technology in Afro-Pentecostal churches has attracted many youth followers who have been influenced positively. However, a challenge lies with the presence of heretic elements and environmental pollution. This is the view expressed by Julius Gathogo;

While putting more emphasis on Western science and technology, Afro-Pentecostals have utilized it as bait for the youths who would prefer well-computerized churches, use of slides, techno-fantasies with mystical leanings, digital devices, consumer electronics, iPhones, twitters, WhatsApp, emails, smartphones, Facebook reunions, Google Meet communications, piano accordions, Bible printing machines and translations, Lanterns, Gramophones, and effective Public Address Systems among other techno-science gadgets. The place of televangelism among Afro-Pentecostals has also been underlined as a critical way of their engagements with science and technology. Training in health, academia, evangelism, and for the Artisans is also a progression of science, though this was largely seen among non-Afro-Pentecostal Churches. The challenge however is the emergency of the NRMs—a section of which is cultic and embraces occultist tendencies despite posing as Afro-Pentecostal outfits in diverse aspects. In showcasing Nairobi County, it has been noted that Afro-Pentecostalism has ignored environmental concerns—and instead concentrated on the Great Commission (Mat 28–17–20), as evangelistic outreach has been viewed as their core mandate. While environmental concern is a central issue in our general survival, neglecting or downplaying such a weighty- matter amounts to a serious miscarriage of the natural flow of things and against common decency.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid 391

<sup>41</sup> [www.kemri.go.ke](http://www.kemri.go.ke)

<sup>42</sup> [Eng.news.cn](http://Eng.news.cn)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid 114, 115

<sup>44</sup> Julius Gathogo, "The Use of Science and Technology Among Afro-Pentecostals: A Theo-Historical Perspective from the Kenyan Context". *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 49 (2), 1-20, p.13, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/12782> Also read Julius Gathogo, "The Reason for Studying African Religion in Post-Colonial Africa," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 36(2), pp.108-117.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid 16, 17

### **African Religion in the Political Life Today**

The African Religion has also had an impact on the political realms of Africa to date. The ranks in African religion are almost similar to those in African governments today. Africans take seriously the issue of bureaucracy thus finding it easy to submit to people in authority, as mentioned by Yusufu Turaki; "The ranking of spirit beings in a traditional religious worldview has important consequences for traditional concepts of morality and ethics."<sup>46</sup> The hierarchical leadership in Africa stems from that of the African Religion. This is reflected in the ease with which African countries like Kenya have embraced the devolved kind of government, divided into counties. A similar view is expressed by Yusufu Turaki;

In the traditional worldview, the supreme Being appears to be ontologically transcendent. He occupies a hierarchical position in the pantheon of spirit beings and may assign role and functions to the lesser beings. He himself is inactive or does not get involved in daily communal affairs. However, this transcendence and aloofness must not be interpreted in absolute terms. He is also present in the community and in the hierarchy. Sometimes the gods, divinities, spirits and ancestors are seen as mediators, acting with the sanction and knowledge of God himself, although at other times they act as independent agents.<sup>47</sup>

Reconciliation and conflict resolution between individuals and communities has been part and parcel of the African Religion. Dr. Byang Kato and John S. Mbiti resolved their differences that had arisen out of difference in opinion because they had an African Religious background. This case has been narrated by John S. Mbiti;

The late Dr. Byang Kato's *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* appeared in 1975... Dr. Kato's passionate attack on fellow theologians and the ecumenical movement arose partly out of insufficient understanding on his part. I had the opportunity of discussing with him some of the issues, on December 9, 1975. At the end he apologized to me for having unjustifiably attacked me and promised to rewrite and change the relevant parts of his book. Ten days later, on December 19, 1975, Dr. Kato drowned on the shores of the Indian Ocean in Kenya. I learned a year later that before his tragic death Dr. Kato had actually written the parts he promised to revise, and the publisher of the book undertook to incorporate them into subsequent printings of the book. I give this personal note about Dr. Kato as an indication that he had no malicious intention in this book; he apologized to me and in the same spirit I am sure he would have made personal apologies to those others whom he had attacked. His death was certainly a major loss for African theology ... and may God rest his soul in peace.<sup>48</sup>

African countries have exhibited the spirit of peace through reconciliation and conflict resolution when warring political party leaders and countries have successfully mended their differences. For example, Eritrea and Ethiopia stopped fighting in recent years and agreed to co-exist peacefully. The reconciliation between the ruling party NARC Kenya and the opposition which resulted to successful formation of a coalition government, bringing to an end a post-election violence in 2007 was in the spirit of African religious – political oneness. African Religion has helped Africans to see themselves as a unique community hence the quest for freedom from manipulation by other continents. The African Religion is the one that gave birth to liberative theology which has resulted to increased respect for the African kind of leadership. That is why even African traditional kingdoms that exist today like Eswatini and Morocco still receive recognition worldwide. Joseph Ogbonnaya attests to this fact;

African theology should be understood in the light of the theologies of the Third World. The theme of liberation, emphasis on the God of the poor, and a new epistemological approach that sees the world as an ongoing project that involves humankind in transformation and construction of a new world, form recurring themes. Discernment, especially of the structures of evil and sin, is very important in the understanding of Christianity.<sup>49</sup>

The Black Theology which has its roots in South Africa came along with Liberation theology as a version of African Religion. The two were instrumental in setting the pace for the struggle for independence among African nations. On the same note, Christianity has become relevant to Africans for it teaches and offers redemption for believers through Jesus. Joseph Ogbonnaya shows the relationship between these two types of theology in the African context as far as the political realm is concerned;

Black Theology of South Africa is the theology that arose in response to the apartheid regime of South Africa. It benefits from the Black Theology of the United States. Since the demise of apartheid and the emergence of majority rule in 1994, the tension between

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid 30

<sup>47</sup> Ibid 59

<sup>48</sup> J S Mbiti, *The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 119.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid 51

African Theology of inculturation and Black Theology of South Africa is no longer prevalent. We can speak of African Theology, remembering the different nuances in different African countries of the theology that seeks to make Christianity relevant to the cultural, political, economic, social, religious, and personal and environmental needs of African peoples. The significance of Black Theology to African theological experience remains indispensable. Black Theology of South Africa, just like Majority World Church theology, is contextual theology, taking seriously the historical situation in theologizing.<sup>50</sup>

The African Religious concept of a king's power is so real. Although it does not have a written code, it has a direct impact on the African political system because the transcendent feature of a king and other leaders places them in a position of non-questionable power. Jacob K. Olupona clarifies this; "Sacred authority in Africa differs from stereotypical Western notions of secular leadership insofar as African monarchs, chiefs, and elders fulfill both political and religious roles. The much-vaunted Western division between religion and the body politic is often more legal fiction than reality."<sup>51</sup> African Religion places kings and leaders in a supreme position. Indeed, they are accorded respect as though they were gods. It is no wonder that politicians in many parts of Africa have taken advantage of their subjects and oppressed them. This oppression is in the form of denial of rights to air their views regarding the ruling regimes. Consequently, those who dare give opposing views are punished without the due legal trial process. Jacob K. Olupona gives the consequences of this political belief in Africa.

In some cases, kings are also said to possess mystical, life sustaining powers, with their own well-being intimately entwined with the well-being of their people, lands, and institutions. For this reason, African kings are often the subject of extremely strict taboos that address how their person can be treated, predicated on an indexical relationship between the body of the king and 38 the body of the kingdom. The Oṣoni of Ifè., the highest king of the Yorùbá people, is also considered to be the embodiment of òrìṣà on Earth, and his health is intimately tied to the well-being of all Yorùbá people. Because of his elevated status, he cannot be addressed directly. He cannot be seen by casual onlookers to be engaging in many ordinary human activities, such as eating, nor can it be acknowledged if he is ill or has died. Numerous elaborate euphemisms are used to discuss his earthly, physical needs and body. Although the current Oṣoni is more modern than many of his predecessors, he still spends much of his time within his palace compound, where the days are ordered around local judicial matters, functions, and ritual requirements and actions.<sup>52</sup>

The African Religion is structured along tribal groups. Although these groups enhance unity at the grassroots level, they have been known to be a fertile ground for intertribal wars which are equivalent to civil war in modern Africa. In addition, these political alliances make African citizens vote in their tribesmen regardless of their incompetencies. This political aspect of the African Religion is best expressed in the words of John S. Mbiti;

Most of the indigenous peoples of Africa have lived for hundreds of years, and continue to live, in units or clusters commonly referred to as tribes. It is difficult to say where "tribe" ends, since the number of those who make up a single "tribe" varies considerably. The Yoruba of Nigeria are estimated as twelve million, while the Hadzapi of Tanzania number less than one thousand, and some "tribes" are dying out completely. Exactly how many "tribes" there are in Africa, no-body seems to know: they would probably be eight hundred to twelve hundred in all, partly depending on where one draws the line in cases of closely related peoples.<sup>53</sup>

In their quest for independence in all areas of life and to maintain their indigenous religious heritage, Africans moved on to formation of independent churches upon the introduction of Christianity. Their leaders appeared to be rivals to the insecure post-independent African regimes. For this reason, they have been roughly handled more often than not. As a result, they have earned sympathy from their followers and increasingly become popular to date. John S. Mbiti gives details on this political feature of the African Religion;

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness and standard of the independent Churches in Africa. Some of them have incorporated traditional practices which are clearly not Christian and which drown and reduce their Christianity to a very low level. Others seriously and sincerely maintain a high standard of Christian life, judged by the morality of their followers, their numerical expansions and their provision of an atmosphere in which the human problems of their members are satisfactorily given attention. Some of the groups, or their leaders, are subject to pressure and persecution from mission Churches and governments, both

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid 64

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 117

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 118

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 131

colonial and independent African. This form of persecution often drives the movements underground and encourages them to gain greater momentum.<sup>54</sup>

The African Religion has always given Africans a sense of belonging and identity thus making them loyal to their political territory. On the contrary, in the recent past, there is a good number of young Africans who do not want to be associated with the African Religion. This is as a result of Christianity and Islam in the post-modern era. However, gradually, many African students have discovered that the African Religion is their national heritage. E. Bolaji Idowu makes this observation;

This apparent situation has occurred because it has become unfashionable, by and large, for anyone except an old person to declare himself an adherent of the traditional religion. In public records, like those of the hospitals, where religion is still indicated, people will claim to belong to either Christianity or Islam; and the same thing happens in any other situations where people have to answer the question 'What is your religion?' Here again, it is easy to conclude that African Traditional Religion has had its day. We must not, however, take mere appearance for reality. If we return to the subject of university students, we shall find that what we have said is not the end of the matter. Their studies have led several of the students to what they consider to be a joyful discovery of a valuable heritage which had been lost; some even feel that, somehow, the foreigners who brought their own religions and cultures to displace African indigenous ones have only come to cheat them of their own God-given heritage. They have often, therefore, expressed cheerful surprise in their discovery that Africa is blessed with so many indigenous spiritual and cultural treasures.<sup>55</sup>

In the presidential circles of Africa, an integration of African religion has been featuring in the form of prayers and rituals. A traditional African Religious specialist is often given a chance to lead prayers in a national event like *Jamuhuri* (Republican/Freedom) and *Madaraka* (Self-Rule) Day celebrations in Kenya. In his efforts to rekindle the practices of the African Religion, Kwame Nkrumah once ordered the pouring of libations to ancestors instead of Christian prayers, during the opening of parliamentary proceedings as narrated by E. Bolaji Idowu;

A new interest has, of course, been born with regard to everything African in consequence of nationalism, the independence of African nations, and the general search for identity throughout the continent. Kwame Nkrumah, the advocate of the philosophy of 'African personality', took as one of his first official steps in his effort to restore the soul of Africa the introduction of the traditional foundation ritual into government affairs. Such a ritual precedes anything to be done by Africans in their own traditional setting — its purpose is always to acknowledge the divine lordship over the whole earth: man is a tenant on God's earth and, therefore, must not undertake anything without divine sanction. To replace the formal opening of Parliament with Christian prayers as instituted by the colonial rulers, Nkrumah ruled that libation should be poured and the prescribed details of a foundation ritual carried out.<sup>56</sup>

Having recognized the prominent place of the African Religion, many governments in Africa have entrenched it in their constitutions. For example, the Kenyan constitution has factored in the African customary marriage along with the Islamic and Christian ones. Through the lenses of the African Religion, Africans have shifted from low self-esteem as a dark continent. Instead, they have asserted their rightful picture of themselves as a continent worth of recognition and human dignity at the international level as affirmed by Jacob Olupona.

Since the end of the Second World War, Africans have witnessed significant changes in the way they look at themselves and at their societies. These changes in self-perception have been the result of political and intellectual revolutions in the world around them. Since the defeat of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi movement in Europe two developments have occurred and each affects the manner in which Africans are perceived by outsiders and how they perceive themselves. The first is the decolonization of the imperial territories of European powers in Africa. The second is the decline of global racialism and the increasing appreciation of cultural diversity in the international community.<sup>57</sup>

Moral values such as hospitality and kindness stipulated in the African Religion have made a great contribution towards maintaining peace in the African countries. Members of the community live by these values hence keeping off violence. Igbigbolade S. Aderibigbe shows how the African Religion, Islam and Christianity have promoted peace in Africa;

Religion, by nature, detests violence, cheating, and acquisition of wealth through illegal and ungodly means, which promotes conflictive existence. As a matter of fact, religion is the very foundation of societal morality and sustainable peace. Religion regulates the conduct and behavior of people in society and preaches vital virtues needed in sustaining a nation towards peaceful

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid 308

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 204, 205

<sup>56</sup> Ibid 206

<sup>57</sup> Ibid 11

coexistence. Religious sermons are preached in churches and mosques with specific reference to citations from the Bible and Qur'an to modify the behavior of the people positively to bring about peace and security in society.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the various aspects of the African Religion discussed in this research article. It is clear that the African religion is neither an idea nor a theory. African Religion exists among Africans as peoples reality. Africans believe and practice their religion. They actually live it. Scholars of all fields ought to put this factor into consideration lest they result to studying the African Religion theoretically. The results of such a study would be invalid bits and pieces of myths about the African Religion. This word of caution has been given by Jacob Olupona;

It is important to place African traditional religion in its proper place among the religions of the world. Although many books on "world religions" hardly contain a single reference to the religious heritage of Africa, it is pertinent to point out that the religion of Africa does not live in the pages of books on "world religions", rather it lives in the hearts and lives of African people who practice it. It is necessary, therefore, to endeavor to approach it through the inner life of its practitioners, although one cannot completely ignore its externals. But a word of caution needs to be thrown in about the temptation of looking at African traditional religion from the side of doctrine rather than from the side of practice, for theory is not the most significant factor African traditional religion about any religion.<sup>59</sup>

African Religion and the lives of Africans are inseparable. The implication is that as long as Africans live, its beliefs and practices are likely to be traced in their culture even in the context of other religions such as Christianity and Islam. This trend can be found in the words of Jacob Olupona as he adds;

As the source of life and meaning, African traditional religion, as the most vital institution in the past, has continued to manifest its vitality in old and new forms today. The new forms are rooted in the traditional religious customs and they manifest themselves in the preoccupations and deep concerns that are of characteristically African provenance. The religious heritage represents a truth which offers abiding spiritual values which are essential for the religious life and are not changed by man's increasing control of his environment... The vitality of the new religious movements in Africa as is seen, for example, in the indigenous churches, more popularly called independent churches, is due largely to their being rooted in the traditional religious customs, and in Christianity being given an African expression. Thus, Kofi Asare Opoku a Christianity which was presented as a religion of mental culture has been transformed into a religion of being and doing. Islam's "success" is also due to its meeting the enduring needs of African traditional religion.<sup>60</sup>

For positive impact, the gospel ought to be presented as being certain and reliable. In the words of Tite Tienou. "A positive theology, which takes as its starting, the *certainty* and *reliability* of the word of God can be the best scholarship possible without leading to heresy. A positive theology for Africa will take God's definitive revelation as given, but it will make use of the best Scientific methods and tools available to us, for evangelical theology need not be synonymous with obscurantism."<sup>61</sup> Christians should preserve only those aspects of African culture that are biblically sound. This is the advice offered by Tite Tienou; "To be a good theologian in Africa one must be well read in cultural anthropology. We need to examine African culture very closely to see what elements are compatible or incompatible with the gospel message."<sup>62</sup>

For Christians in Africa to win their fellow Africans to Christianity, the best approach is to engage them in interreligious dialogue rather than condemn the African culture. The suggestion here is that this dialogue could be referred to as *Afro-Biblical Dialogue*. The objective of this dialogue would be to lead Christians in Africa to find out and agree on the aspects of African Religion that are in agreement with the bible. The understanding here is that some aspects of the African Religion are similar to those of the bible and can be easily adopted in the Christian faith. Christians in Africa should not condemn African culture. African Religion is part and parcel of the African cultural heritage. On matters African culture and such dialogue, Aloysius Lugira explains that;

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid 330

<sup>59</sup> Jacob Olupona, *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John S. Mbiti* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 68, 69.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid 79, 80

<sup>61</sup> Ibid 44

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 21, 22

African religion is a vital part of the African heritage, and Africans who live on the African continent belong to that heritage. They are culturally connected to African religion. However, not all African people today claim to be adherents of African religion. Many of them are declared Christians, Muslims, or members of other religions... Today leaders from other religions understand that they must first be able to talk meaningfully with others about the religion they have grown up in as well as the one they are adopting. Not long ago the missionary effort was aimed at erasing African religion from the African continent and the world. Today, however, the message is one of dialogue. That this is happening is a further assurance that African religion will continue to prosper. Far from being wiped out by the influx of other religions, African religion continues to thrive.<sup>63</sup>

The church in Africa today is at a crossroad with reference to the adoption of African Religion. This situation is similar to the one the early church found itself in, as it was receiving pressure from Hellenistic Jews. The Jerusalem council took an interreligious dialogue approach. That is how they were able to offer a solution on "what the Gentiles should do when they became Christians" (Acts 15). Theologians and mature Christian leaders in Africa can also adopt this approach in order to offer biblical guidance on controversial issues emanating from the African Religion.

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**Acknowledgements:**

The Author acknowledges the librarians who enabled her to access crucial information that shaped the research article.

**Ethical pledge:**

The researcher wishes to confirm that she followed full ethical considerations and acknowledged her sources appropriately without plagiarizing or duplicating other people's works unprofessionally.

**Competing Interests:**

The author declares that she had no financial or personal relationships or undue interests that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this research article.

**Author(s) contributions:**

The researcher concedes that she is the sole author of this research article that creatively contributes to the world of academia.

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**Ethical considerations statement:**

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects. No ethical clearance was needed and/or required for this article.