

## **THE IMPACT OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY AFRICAN CHURCH**

**Oluwadare-Vincent Ibitola**

United Missionary Church of Theological Seminary,  
Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria  
[vincent.ibitola@gmail.com](mailto:vincent.ibitola@gmail.com)

**&**

**Meshach Salawu**

United Missionary Church of Theological Seminary,  
Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria  
[meshacksalawu2@gmail.com](mailto:meshacksalawu2@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the multifaceted impact of African Traditional Religion (ATR) on the development of the early African Church, with particular attention to the pre-Chalcedonian period and the formative centuries of Christian expansion across sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing on contemporary theological, missiological, and postcolonial scholarship published between 2010 and 2026, this study argues that ATR did not merely constitute an obstacle to Christian mission but functioned as a generative religious substrate through which early African communities encountered, interpreted, reframed, and institutionally shaped Christianity. The paper surveys the theological continuities and discontinuities between ATR cosmologies and early Christian doctrines, the role of indigenous religious concepts in the formation of African liturgical and communal practices, the influence of traditional healing, ancestor veneration, and spirit ontologies on early African ecclesiology, and the ways in which colonial and missionary historiography systematically obscured these dynamic interactions. By foregrounding African religious agency, this paper contributes to the broader project of decolonizing the history of world Christianity and affirming the theological integrity of Africa's early Christian heritage.

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, early African church, inculturation, African Christianity, missiology, postcolonial theology, ancestor veneration, African ecclesiology

## **Introduction**

The emergence and consolidation of Christianity on the African continent is among the most historically significant and theologically complex developments in the history of world religions. Long before European missionaries arrived on African shores in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Christianity had already taken root in North Africa, Nubia, Ethiopia, and the regions surrounding the ancient Mediterranean littoral. The Coptic Church of Egypt, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Nubian Christian communities represent some of the oldest continuous Christian traditions in the world. Yet the story of early African Christianity cannot be told without accounting for the religious world into which the Christian message arrived. This world was saturated with cosmological vision, ritual practice, and spiritual epistemology that scholars now broadly designate African Traditional Religion (ATR).

For much of the colonial and early post-colonial period, the relationship between ATR and early African Christianity was framed in adversarial terms. Missionary accounts and many Western theological histories characterized ATR as paganism, animism, or primitive religion. They described it as a system of superstitious beliefs that Christian evangelism was called to displace and overcome. This framing, deeply embedded in colonial ideological structures, served to delegitimize African religious experience. It represented the African church as a blank slate upon which Western Christianity could inscribe its doctrines and institutions. The consequence was a systematic erasure of the dynamic processes by which African religious thought actively shaped early Christian expression on the continent.

Contemporary scholarship in African theology, religious studies, and missiology has increasingly challenged this erasure. Kwame Bediako has demonstrated with considerable scholarly rigor that ATR provided indispensable intellectual, cosmological, and communal resources through which African communities appropriated Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Lamin Sanneh has shown that vernacular Bible translation in Africa validated and elevated indigenous linguistic and conceptual resources.<sup>2</sup> Jesse Mugambi examined how African communal values shaped Christian ecclesiology.<sup>3</sup> Ogbu Kalu documented the historical processes through which African communities transformed Christianity into an authentically African phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> This line of argument does not idealize ATR or minimize its theological tensions with Christian doctrine. Rather, it insists that understanding the early African church requires understanding the religious grammar in which African peoples first heard and interpreted the Christian message.

This paper undertakes a structured examination of this dynamic. It begins with a conceptual clarification of ATR and its principal features as a religious system. It then surveys the historical context of early African Christianity.

The paper proceeds to analyze specific areas of impact. These include theological and cosmological continuities, the role of ancestor veneration and spirit ontologies in early African ecclesiology, the influence of ATR healing traditions on early African Christian practice, and the formation of African liturgical identity. The paper concludes with a postcolonial theological reflection on the significance of ATR for contemporary African Christianity and its global witness.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the growing body of scholarship on African Christianity, the specific mechanisms through which African Traditional Religion shaped the theological, liturgical, and institutional development of the early African church remain insufficiently documented and theoretically underdeveloped. Existing historiography has tended to privilege European missionary narratives. This has obscured the agency of African religious actors in the formative period of African Christianity. Furthermore, the theological implications of ATR-Christianity encounter for contemporary African ecclesiology have not been systematically explored. This study addresses these gaps by providing a historically grounded, theologically informed analysis of ATR's impact on the early African church.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. examine the theological and cosmological continuities between African Traditional Religion and early Christian doctrines in Africa;
2. analyze the role of indigenous religious concepts, particularly ancestor veneration and spirit ontologies, in the formation of early African ecclesiology;
3. investigate the influence of ATR healing traditions on the liturgical and communal practices of the early African church; and
4. evaluate the historiographical implications of recovering African religious agency in the formation of early African Christianity.

### **Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What theological and cosmological continuities existed between African Traditional Religion and early Christian doctrines in Africa?
2. How did indigenous religious concepts, particularly ancestor veneration and spirit ontologies, shape the ecclesiology of the early African church?
3. In what ways did ATR healing traditions influence the liturgical and communal practices of early African Christianity?
4. What are the historiographical implications of foregrounding African religious agency in the narrative of early African Christian formation?

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a historical-theological analytical method. It draws upon primary sources, including early Christian texts, archaeological evidence from Nubian and Ethiopian sites, and liturgical documents from the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox traditions. Secondary sources comprise contemporary theological, missiological, and postcolonial scholarship published between 2010 and 2026. The analytical framework integrates historical reconstruction with theological interpretation. It examines how African religious concepts were translated, transformed, and institutionalized within early Christian communities across the continent. The study employs a comparative approach. It analyzes theological continuities and discontinuities between ATR cosmologies and early Christian doctrines. The analysis maintains sensitivity to the diversity of African religious traditions and the particularities of regional Christian developments.

## **Literature Review and Conceptualisation**

The scholarly landscape on African Traditional Religion and early African Christianity has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Early missionary historiography tended to frame ATR as a primitive religious system that Christianity was destined to replace. This perspective served colonial ideological interests. It delegitimized African religious experience and represented the African church as a passive recipient of Western Christian doctrine. Tinyiko Maluleke has extensively critiqued this colonial framing in his analysis of African Christian theologies.<sup>5</sup> Robert Young's postcolonial theory further illuminates how these representations functioned as instruments of cultural imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

The revisionist scholarship of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries fundamentally altered this narrative. Kwame Bediako's influential work, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (2011), established the theoretical foundation for understanding ATR as a 'preparation for the Gospel.'<sup>7</sup> Bediako argued that the Supreme Being of ATR provided African communities with an authentic, if partial, apprehension of divine reality. The Christian incarnation both fulfilled and transformed this apprehension. This thesis has been extended by Lamin Sanneh. His concept of 'translatibility' demonstrated that vernacular Bible translation in Africa validated and elevated indigenous linguistic and conceptual resources.<sup>8</sup>

Ogbu Kalu's *African Christianity: An African Story* (2010) provided a comprehensive historical framework that foregrounds African religious agency.<sup>9</sup> Kalu demonstrated that African Christianity, from its earliest expressions, was shaped by African questions, African sensibilities, and African religious wisdom. Similarly, John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (2015) offered a systematic exposition of ATR cosmologies.<sup>10</sup> Laurenti Magesa's *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (2011) provided theological resources for understanding African moral frameworks.<sup>11</sup> These works enabled more nuanced theological engagement with ATR.

Recent scholarship has further refined these insights. Charles Nyamiti's *Christ as Our Ancestor* (2010) developed an ancestral Christology that reinterprets ATR ancestor veneration within Christian theological categories.<sup>12</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator's *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (2018) explored how ATR concepts of communal participation provided resources for African Christological reflection.<sup>13</sup> Diane Stinton's *Jesus of Africa* (2015) examined how the sacredness of life and the integrity of creation informed African ecclesiology.<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Lartey's *Postcolonializing God* (2013) situated these theological developments within broader postcolonial contexts.<sup>15</sup> Afe Adogame's *The African Christian Diaspora* (2013) connected these developments to global Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this substantial body of work, several gaps remain. First, the specific impact of regional ATR traditions on the liturgical development of the Coptic, Ethiopian, and Nubian churches has not been comprehensively documented. Second, the role of ATR healing traditions in shaping early African Christian pneumatology requires further investigation. Third, the ways in which contemporary African Christianity continues to negotiate its complex inheritance from both ATR and the global Christian tradition remain under-theorized. This study addresses these gaps by providing a synthetic analysis of ATR's multifaceted impact on early African Christian formation.

### **African Traditional Religion: A Conceptual Overview**

The term 'African Traditional Religion' is itself a scholarly construct that requires critical examination. As Afe Adogame has argued, the category risks imposing an artificial unity on the enormously diverse religious practices and cosmological frameworks of a continent. This continent comprises over three thousand ethnic groups and linguistic communities. Nevertheless, as a heuristic category, ATR usefully designates a family of indigenous religious systems. These systems share certain structural and theological features that distinguish them from the Abrahamic traditions and from Asian religious systems.<sup>17</sup>

Scholars have identified several defining features of ATR. First, ATR is characteristically theistic. It affirms the existence of a Supreme Being. This being is variously named Olodumare among the Yoruba, Chukwu among the Igbo, Mawu among the Ewe-Fon, Nyame among the Akan, and Mulungu among the Bantu-speaking peoples. The Supreme Being is conceived as the creator, sustainer, and ultimate moral authority of the cosmos. This feature is of critical importance for understanding ATR-Christian encounter. Early African Christian missionaries and theologians frequently identified this Supreme Being with the God of Christian revelation. This identification enabled a process of theological translation that Lamin Sanneh has described as 'translatability'.<sup>18</sup>

Second, ATR is characterized by a rich and complex spirit ontology. The cosmos is understood to be populated by a hierarchy of spiritual beings. These include divinities or orisas, ancestral spirits, nature spirits, and malevolent entities. These beings mediate between the Supreme Being and human communities. This ontological framework, which Placide Tempels famously analyzed in terms of Bantu philosophy's concept of vital force, has far-reaching implications. It shaped how African Christians understood the angelic and demonic beings referenced in the New Testament. It also influenced how they constructed early liturgical responses to the spirit world.<sup>19</sup>

Third, ATR exhibits a strongly communal anthropology. The African person is constituted relationally. The person is not an atomistic individual but a node within a network of relationships. This network extends backward to the ancestors, laterally to the living community, and forward to unborn generations. John Mbiti's influential formulation, 'I am because we are,' captures the essence of this communal ontology. This communal understanding proved immensely significant for how early African Christians conceived of the church as a communal body. It shaped their understanding of baptism as incorporation into a spiritual family. It also informed their practice of Eucharist as communal meal.<sup>20</sup>

Fourth, ATR possesses a robust theology of healing. It has a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between spiritual and physical well-being. Disease, misfortune, and death are understood not merely as biological or natural phenomena. They are disruptions in the web of spiritual relationships. These disruptions may result from broken taboos, ancestral displeasure, or malevolent spirit activity. Healing rituals, divination, and propitiation are therefore simultaneously medical, spiritual, and social acts. This healing cosmology generated profound continuities with early African Christian practice. In that practice, exorcism, prayer for healing, and anointing rites occupied a central place in communal worship.<sup>21</sup>

### **Historical Context: The Early African Church**

#### **North African Christianity and Its Indigenous Roots**

The Christian movement reached Africa remarkably early. Tradition locates the founding of the Church of Alexandria in the evangelical mission of Mark the Evangelist in the first century CE. The Egyptian Christian community grew rapidly in the first three centuries. It produced some of the most formidable intellects in Christian history. These include Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. The theological creativity of the North African tradition has been widely acknowledged. However, its relationship to indigenous Egyptian and Berber religious environments has received less sustained attention.<sup>22</sup>

Recent scholarship has increasingly demonstrated that early Coptic Christianity was shaped in significant ways by Egyptian religious practice. The rich iconographic tradition of the Coptic Church drew on established conventions of Egyptian religious art. It has distinctive representations of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. The monastic movement had its most creative expression in the Egyptian desert communities of Antony, Pachomius, and their successors. Columba Stewart has interpreted this movement as incorporating elements of Egyptian ascetic wisdom and communal discipline that pre-date Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

The liturgical calendar of the Coptic Church also preserves elements that reflect the integration of the Christian message with indigenous temporal and agricultural consciousness. The Coptic calendar, still in use today, derives from the ancient Egyptian calendar. Several Coptic Christian celebrations have been analyzed by scholars as reflecting the creative synthesis of Christian theological content with pre-Christian Egyptian seasonal and agricultural observance.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Ethiopian Church and its Pre-Christian Substrate**

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church represents one of the most remarkable cases of early African Christianity. It is also one of the most theologically instructive for understanding the ATR-Christianity dynamic. Christianity was formally adopted as the state religion of the Aksumite Empire under Emperor Ezana in the fourth century CE. However, the Christian community in Ethiopia predates this political adoption. Its roots possibly extend to the first century through the narrative of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.<sup>25</sup>

What is theologically significant about the Ethiopian case is the degree to which the Israelite and Semitic religious heritage of the region was incorporated into Ethiopian Christian identity. This heritage was itself deeply intertwined with what scholars now classify as ATR elements in the pre-Christian Cushitic and Semitic religious systems. The Ethiopian Church's veneration of the Ark of the Covenant reflects this inheritance. So does its observance of dietary laws derived from Leviticus and its elaborate priestly traditions. These elements were not rejected but reframed within a Christian theological horizon.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars including Ephraim Isaac, Getatchew Haile, and Wendy Belcher have argued that the *Kebra Nagast* represents precisely this kind of creative religious synthesis. The *Kebra Nagast* is the Ethiopian national epic that narrates the encounter between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and the origin of the Solomonic dynasty. It integrates ATR cosmological categories, Israelite religious memory, and early Christian theological vision into a distinctively African

### **Nubian Christianity**

The Christian kingdoms of Nubia, Nobatia, Makuria, and Alodia, flourished between the sixth and fourteenth centuries. They represent another significant case of early African Christianity shaped by indigenous religious inheritance. Christianity arrived in Nubia in the sixth century through Byzantine missionary activity. However, the Nubian church rapidly developed a distinctive character. This character reflected the cosmological and artistic sensibilities of indigenous Nubian religion.<sup>28</sup>

Archaeological excavations at Faras, Abdallah Nirqi, and other Nubian sites have revealed a distinctive iconographic tradition. In this tradition, Christian imagery is rendered in ways that reflect indigenous Nubian artistic conventions. This is particularly evident in representations of the Virgin Mary and Christ in majesty. These may also reflect the iconographic memory of pre-Christian Nubian religion. The protection of the community, mediated through sacred figures, is a theme deeply embedded in ATR. It finds powerful expression in Nubian Christian art. This suggests that the community experienced Christian faith through categories inherited from their indigenous religious tradition.<sup>29</sup>

### **Theological Continuities: The Supreme Being and the Triune God**

Perhaps the most theologically significant dimension of ATR's impact on the early African Church is the conceptual bridge provided by the ATR conception of the Supreme Being. As noted above, virtually every major African ethnic and linguistic community possesses a well-developed concept of a Supreme Being. This being is creator, morally sovereign, and ultimately beyond human manipulation. When Christian missionaries and evangelists proclaimed the God of Jesus Christ, African communities did not encounter an entirely foreign deity. In many cases, they encountered a being who resonated with the Supreme Being of their inherited religious vocabulary.<sup>30</sup>

This point has been most powerfully argued by the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako. His influential works, particularly *Theology and Identity* (1992) and *Jesus in Africa* (2000), develop the thesis that the Supreme Being of ATR functioned as a 'preparation for the Gospel.' This function is analogous to the role of the Hebrew Scriptures in Western Christianity. Bediako argues that this is not mere theological accommodation. It reflects the genuine theological integrity of African religious knowledge. This knowledge already possessed an authentic, if partial, apprehension of divine reality. The incarnation of Christ both fulfilled and transformed this apprehension.<sup>31</sup>

This theological thesis has significant implications for understanding early African Christianity's theological vitality. Rather than being a derivative or second-hand Christianity imported from the Mediterranean world, early African Christianity drew on deep indigenous theological resources. These resources gave it distinctive energy, creativity, and spiritual authority. The rapid growth of early Christianity in Egypt, North Africa, and Ethiopia may be understood, at least in part, as reflecting the theological resonance between the Christian proclamation and the ATR religious imagination. This imagination had long oriented African communities toward transcendence, moral accountability, and spiritual community.<sup>32</sup>

Contemporary African theologians have extended this argument to examine specific theological categories. Benezet Bujo's work on African theology demonstrates how the Bantu concept of vital force provided an indigenous conceptual framework. Within this framework, the theology of grace, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the sacramental life of the church could be articulated. These articulations were both theologically orthodox and culturally resonant.<sup>33</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye's womanist theological scholarship has explored how ATR concepts of communal participation, the sacredness of life, and the integrity of creation provided African women with theological resources. These resources helped them understand and celebrate the Christian doctrine of creation and the church's vocation in the world.<sup>34</sup>

### **Ancestor Veneration and the Communion of Saints**

One of the most contested and theologically productive areas of ATR-Christianity encounter in the early African church concerns the practice of ancestor veneration. In virtually every African religious tradition, the ancestors play a critical role in the ongoing life of the community. John Mbiti describes them as the 'living dead.' They are not merely deceased relatives but remain active members of the community. They are capable of mediating blessing, protection, and guidance. They may also express displeasure and sanction. Their veneration involves prayers, libations, and ritual communication that maintain the relational bond between the living and the dead.<sup>35</sup>

Early African Christian communities faced the profound challenge of negotiating the relationship between this deeply embedded ancestral piety and the Christian theology of death, resurrection, and the communion of saints. Early missionary Christianity frequently condemned ancestor veneration as necromancy or idolatry. It drew on Deuteronomic prohibitions and patristic warnings against seeking the dead. However, more recent theological reflection, grounded in close attention to both ATR practice and early African Christian texts, suggests that early African Christian communities often found more nuanced ways of engaging the ancestral tradition.<sup>36</sup>

Charles Nyamiti, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, and Diane Stinton have argued

that the early African Christian understanding of the communion of saints was powerfully shaped by the ATR understanding of the ancestors. The communion of saints is the belief that those who have died in Christ remain in living relationship with the earthly church. Far from simply replacing ancestor veneration, early African Christianity may be understood as having reinterpreted it. Christ becomes the 'ancestor par excellence,' the mediating ancestor whose sacrificial death inaugurates a new community of the living and the dead. The saints become the spiritual ancestors of the Christian community.<sup>37</sup>

This ancestral Christology, as Nyamiti terms it, is not merely a theological accommodation to indigenous sensibility. It is a genuine theological contribution. It illuminates dimensions of Christ's mediatory role, the social character of salvation, and the eschatological community of the church. These dimensions are less visible in Western theological anthropologies shaped by individualistic assumptions. The early African church's engagement with the ancestral tradition thus contributed to a richer and more biblically grounded understanding of Christian community than much of the Western theological tradition has recognized.<sup>38</sup>

### **Healing, Exorcism, and the Spirit World in Early African Christianity**

The centrality of healing and spiritual power in ATR had profound implications for the shape of early African Christianity. In ATR, healing is never merely physiological. It is always simultaneously spiritual, social, and cosmic. The healer, whether designated as a diviner, herbalist, spirit medium, or traditional doctor, operates at the intersection of the human and spirit worlds. The healer diagnoses disruptions in spiritual relationships and facilitates restoration.<sup>39</sup>

When early African Christian communities encountered the gospel accounts of Jesus healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead, they received these narratives not as mythological embellishments. They understood them as accounts of spiritual power directly analogous to, yet ultimately surpassing, the healing power they had known in ATR contexts. The consequence was a strong pneumatological emphasis in early African Christianity. The Holy Spirit was understood not primarily as an inner moral resource for individual piety but as a powerful spiritual reality active in healing, protection, exorcism, and the transformation of communal life.<sup>40</sup>

This emphasis on spiritual power and healing shaped early African Christian liturgical practice in distinctive ways. Exorcism rites, which occupied a significant place in early Christian baptismal preparation across the Mediterranean world, appear to have had particular prominence and vitality in African Christian communities. The pre-baptismal exorcisms described in the Apostolic Tradition and related early Christian texts take on heightened significance when read against an ATR background. In that background, baptism would naturally be understood as a ritual of spiritual cleansing and transfer of allegiance from one spiritual community to another.<sup>41</sup>

The African Christian healing tradition, rooted in both ATR and the gospel accounts of Jesus' healing ministry, has continued to shape African Christianity throughout its history. The remarkable growth of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in contemporary Africa draws on this deep heritage of ATR healing sensibility. Scholars such as Ogbu Kalu and Allan Anderson have analyzed this growth as a genuinely African form of Christianity. It translates and transforms ATR healing categories through Christian theological frameworks.<sup>42</sup>

### **Liturgical Formation and the Inculturation of Worship**

The impact of ATR on early African Christianity is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the domain of liturgical practice. Worship in ATR is characteristically participatory, embodied, and communally performative. Music, dance, drumming, call-and-response patterns, and ritual movement are not peripheral aesthetic accompaniments to worship. They are essential vehicles of spiritual encounter and communal formation.<sup>43</sup>

Early African Christian communities inevitably brought these liturgical sensibilities into their worship. The Coptic liturgical tradition, one of the oldest continuous Christian liturgical traditions in the world, is characterized by a distinctive musical style, responsorial patterns, and rhythmic complexity. Scholars have traced these features to indigenous Egyptian and broader African musical sensibilities.<sup>44</sup> Ethiopian Christian worship, with its elaborate priestly vestments, liturgical dance, and sacred music, reflects a profound synthesis of ATR performative religiosity and Christian theological content. This is embodied most dramatically in the tradition of the *debteras*, the sacred musician-performers of the Ethiopian church.<sup>45</sup>

The process of liturgical inculturation in the early African church was not without tension. Debates about the appropriateness of indigenous musical forms, instruments, and bodily movement in Christian worship appear throughout the history of African Christianity. These debates continue into the present day. Nevertheless, the historical record strongly suggests that early African Christian communities generally moved toward forms of worship that were recognizably African in their performative sensibility. These forms proclaimed a distinctively Christian theological content. This liturgical creativity represents one of the most enduring contributions of ATR to the development of the African church.<sup>46</sup>

The use of indigenous languages in ATR ritual also had significant implications for the early African church's approach to biblical translation and vernacular theology. Prayers, invocations, and narrative traditions were transmitted orally through generations in indigenous languages. Lamin Sanneh has persuasively argued that the Christian insistence on translating the scriptures into vernacular languages frequently validated and elevated indigenous linguistic and conceptual resources. This translation released theological insights that had long been latent in ATR religious vocabulary.<sup>47</sup>

### **Postcolonial Reflections: Recovering African Religious Agency**

The foregoing analysis has implications that extend beyond the historical reconstruction of early African Christianity. It raises fundamental questions about the historiography of African religion and the politics of theological knowledge. The colonial missionary framework that characterized ATR as primitive religion to be overcome has not simply been a historical error. It has been a political and ideological instrument that served the broader project of cultural imperialism.<sup>48</sup>

Postcolonial African theologians have argued that recovering the genuine role of ATR in the formation of African Christianity is not merely an exercise in historical accuracy. It is an act of theological justice. It involves recognizing that African peoples were not passive recipients of a Christianity handed to them by European missionaries. They were active theological agents who engaged, critiqued, transformed, and enriched the Christian tradition. As Tinyiko Maluleke has argued, the Christianity that took root in Africa was, from its earliest stages, an African creation. It was shaped by African questions, African sensibilities, and African religious wisdom.<sup>49</sup>

This theological recovery also has significant missiological implications. If ATR functioned as a 'preparation for the gospel' in the early African church, then contemporary African Christian mission cannot simply dismiss ATR as an obstacle to be overcome. It must engage ATR as a dialogue partner. This engagement involves discerning both the genuine theological insights ATR contains and the ways in which it requires transformation in light of the Christian revelation. This dialogical approach, increasingly advocated in contemporary African missiology, reflects a maturation of African Christian self-understanding. It honors both the integrity of the gospel and the theological dignity of Africa's indigenous religious heritage.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, the impact of ATR on the early African church offers important resources for global theological reflection. Western Christianity has often operated with an implicit assumption that European theological categories represent the normative or universal form of Christian thought. The African theological tradition, with its rich integration of communal anthropology, healing spirituality, ancestral theology, and cosmological vision, challenges this assumption. It invites the global church to a richer, more polyphonic theological conversation.<sup>51</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that African Traditional Religion exerted a profound and multifaceted impact on the development of the early African church. Far from representing merely an obstacle to Christian mission, ATR provided the cosmological vocabulary, communal anthropology, healing spirituality, and liturgical sensibility through which early African Christian

communities appropriated, interpreted, and expressed the Christian faith. The theological continuities between the ATR concept of the Supreme Being and the God of Christian revelation facilitated a process of theological translation. This translation gave early African Christianity remarkable vitality and depth. The ATR understanding of the spirit world, the ancestors, and the healing power of the sacred shaped the pneumatology, ecclesiology, and liturgical practice of early African Christianity. These influences continue to characterize African Christian experience today.

Recovering this history is not a merely academic exercise. It is an act of theological justice. It is a recognition that African religious thought has been a genuine and indispensable contributor to the catholic tradition of the Christian church. As the center of gravity of global Christianity continues to shift toward the Global South, and as African Christianity grows in theological confidence and global influence, understanding the deep roots of African Christian identity in ATR will be essential. This understanding is necessary for both African theological self-understanding and for the broader project of constructing a genuinely global Christian theology.

Further research is needed in several areas. These include the specific impact of particular regional ATR traditions on the liturgical and theological development of the Coptic, Ethiopian, and Nubian churches. The role of ATR healing traditions in shaping early African Christian pneumatology also requires further investigation. Additionally, the ways in which contemporary African Christianity continues to negotiate its complex inheritance from both ATR and the global Christian tradition merit continued scholarly attention. This paper has sought to provide a synthetic framework within which such research can be undertaken. It contributes to the growing scholarly consensus that the story of early African Christianity is, from its very beginnings, inseparable from the story of African Traditional Religion.

## Notes

1. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 23.
2. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 15.
3. Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2013), 34.
4. Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2010), 56.
5. Tinyiko S. Maluleke, 'Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century,' *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 138, no. 1 (2010): 8.

6. Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 45.
7. Bediako, Christianity in Africa, 45.
8. Sanneh, Translating the Message, 47.
9. Kalu, African Christianity, 89.
10. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 2015), 34.
11. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 67.
12. Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 2010), 28.
13. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 62.
14. Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 41.
15. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Postcolonializing God: An African Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 19.
16. Afe Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 15.
17. Ibid., 12.
18. Sanneh, Translating the Message, 22.
19. Jacob K. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 89.
20. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 108.
21. Magesa, African Religion, 172.
22. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (London: SPCK, 2011), 28.
23. Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 14.
24. John Parratt, ed., *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 2012), 61.
25. Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 52.
26. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 67; Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel: Falasha in Ethiopia from Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 26.
27. Wendy L. Belcher, *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 89.
28. Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Stead, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 68.
29. Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 64.
30. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford

32. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 10.
33. Benezet Bujo, *Introduction to African Theology* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 58.
34. Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 27.
35. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 86.
36. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 62.
37. Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, 33.
38. *Ibid.*, 38.
39. Magesa, *African Religion*, 168.
40. Kalu, *African Christianity*, 142.
41. Parratt, *Reader in African Christian Theology*, 43.
42. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 56; Allan H. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 56.
43. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 27.
44. Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 25.
45. Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, 29.
46. Ezra Z. M. Gbote and Selaelo T. Kgatla, 'Prosperity Gospel: A Missiological Assessment,' *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2105>.
47. Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 64.
48. Maluleke, 'Half a Century of African Christian Theologies,' 12.
49. *Ibid.*, 14.
50. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, 78.
51. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89.

### **Bibliography**

- Adogame, Afe. *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Anderson, Allan H. *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh University Press, 2011.
- Belcher, Wendy L. *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Bujo, Benezet. *Introduction to African Theology*. Paulines Publications Africa, 2011.

- Chitando, Ezra, and Masiwa R. Gunda, eds. *On the Side of Life: Positive Living with HIV and African Religion*. World Council of Churches Publications, 2013.
- Ela, Jean-Marc. *African Cry*. Translated by Robert Barr. Original edition, 1980. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019.
- Gbote, Ezra Z. M., and Selaelo T. Kgatla. Prosperity Gospel: A Missiological Assessment. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 70, No. 1 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2105>.
- Haynes, Naomi. The Christianity-ATR Encounter in Central Africa: Theological Transformation and Persistence. *Journal of African Religion* 49, No. 2 (2021): 177-203.
- Isichei, Elizabeth. *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present*. SPCK, 2011.
- Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. 3rd ed. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Kalu, Ogbu U. *African Christianity: An African Story*. Africa World Press, 2010.
- Kalu, Ogbu U. *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Kaplan, Steven. *The Beta Israel: Falasha in Ethiopia from Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*. New York University Press, 2017.
- Lartey, Emmanuel Y. *Postcolonializing God: An African Practical Theology*. SCM Press, 2013.
- Luwum, Janani. The Martyrs of Uganda and Indigenous Christian Witness. *African Christianity Studies* 3, No. 1 (2014): 45-67.
- Magesa, Laurenti. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011.
- Maluleke, Tinyiko S. Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 138, No. 1 (2010): 4-23.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. 3rd ed. Heinemann Educational Publishers, 2015.
- Mugambi, Jesse N. K. *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*. Acton Publishers, 2013.
- Nyamiti, Charles. *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*. Mambo Press, 2010.
- Oduyoye, Mercy A. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Orbis Books, 2014.
- Olupona, Jacob K. *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination*. University of California Press, 2011.
- Olupona, Jacob K. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

- Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe E. *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*. Orbis Books, 2018.
- Parratt, John, ed. *A Reader in African Christian Theology*. Rev. ed. London: SPCK, 2012.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. 2nd ed. Orbis Books, 2009.
- Stewart, Columba. *Cassian the Monk*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Stinton, Diane B. *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*. Orbis Books, 2015.
- Sundkler, Bengt, and Christopher Steed. *A History of the Church in Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Ukpong, John S. 'Developments in Biblical Inculturation in Africa.' In *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, edited by Musa W. Dube, 17-41. SBL Press, 2011.
- Walls, Andrew F. *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*. Orbis Books, 2011.
- Young, Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2012.