

Discuss why scholars today disagree with the term African Traditional Religion (ATR). Refer to at least three scholars and illustrate your argumentation with one indigenous religion in sub-Saharan Africa today.

African Traditional Religion, hereafter referred to in the shorthand ATR, is a term used to consolidate the diverse and multifarious indigenous religions in Africa (Grillo, Klinken and Ndzovu, 2019, p.17). The term was popularised by scholars such as E. Bọlaji Idowu, Geoffrey Parrinder, and John S. Mbiti. Many of the key scholars who developed the study of African religions were also trained in Christian theology, and as such they have tended to view African traditional religions through a Christian lens (Olupona, 2014, xxii). As a result, they emphasised the similarities between ATR and Christianity, such as a belief in God, which resulted in indigenous religions being portrayed, somewhat inaccurately, as monotheistic (2019, p.17). Scholars since, however, have deviated from earlier trends which emphasised tradition, and are instead focused on the adaptability of African and African derived religions (2014, p.xxiv). There has been a shift in the study of African religions which has rendered the term ATR outdated.

Foundational scholars such as John S. Mbiti are explored to understand where the term originated from. Thereafter this discussion dissects the term “African Traditional Religion” in order to examine why scholars today disagree with its use. The Akan group of Ghana provides a case study through which to understand the arguments against its use. This discussion explores scholarship from two Akan philosophers, Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, in order to provide an understanding of Akan beliefs and practices. Wiredu (1998, p.17) suggests that African religions have been impacted by colonialism, in such ways as imposing use of the English language which alters African philosophical conceptualisation. For this reason, he stresses the importance of decolonising religion and philosophy, which illustrates the importance of giving academic focus to indigenous religions in Africa and examining the language we use to do so. Wiredu (1998, p.26) suggests that one method of decolonising is to study indigenous philosophers. It is important to hear the voices of those who practice indigenous religions, and not just

those who have observed them, in order to gain a deeper and more accurate understanding.

John S. Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian, philosopher, and pastor, is one of the most notable scholars on the subject of African religions (Anekwe, 2019). He is credited for popularising the term “ATR” in his seminal book *African Religions and Philosophy* (Mbiti, 1969). Although he does acknowledge the rich diversity in African religious beliefs and practices, his perspective focuses instead on the similarities that unite African religions. In the preface to the second edition of *African Religions and Philosophy*, he explains that in the first edition, he used the plural term “African religions” in order to “keep alive the diversity of African religiosity”, however, he has since elected to use the singular term “African religion”, in order to emphasize the commonalities (Mbiti, 1989, p.xiii).

One such perceived commonality is the presence of a notion of God (Mbiti, 1989, p.29). Ghanaian Philosopher Kwasi Wiredu challenges the tendency of some African scholars to conflate the Christian God with African concepts of God. He suggests that this tendency is the result of early depictions of Africa from early European scholars, which typically depicted Africans as too primitive to conceive of God on their own (Wiredu, 1998, p.37), and generally viewed indigenous religions as unsophisticated and inferior to Christianity (Olupona, 2014, p.xx). Therefore, in aligning African beliefs with Christian beliefs, African scholars were able to demonstrate the capacity to know God without foreign intervention. Furthermore, African scholars who conflate the two, such as Mbiti, tend to be Christian, so this conceptual integration provides a way for them to worship the Christian God as the one true God without sacrificing their indigenous beliefs. Over fifty years have passed since the original publication of *African Religions and Philosophy*, therefore it is surely relevant to question whether it is still useful or productive to consolidate African religious practices under one umbrella, or whether doing so is problematic.

One component of the term “ATR” which is problematic is the word “Africa”. Africa is the second largest continent, both in terms of population and land area, in which there are

54 countries (Boudreau *et al.*, 2025). The continent is home to hundreds of ethnic groups and over a thousand languages (Olupona, 2014, p.1). Consequently, there is a rich diversity in religious beliefs and practices and philosophical thought among Africans. As such, it is often unfitting to discuss Africans as one homogenous group. There are numerous ethnic groups within a country. In Ghana, Akan are the largest ethnic group accounting for 45.7% of the population (Dokua Sasu, 2023). The name “Akan” refers to a number of subgroups, including Akwapim, Akyem, Anyi, Aowin, Asante, Bono, Denkyira, Fante, Kwahu, Nzima, and Sefwi (Quarcoopome, 1997, p.135). Although each of these subgroups speak their own distinct dialect, there is a shared lingua franca referred to as Twi or Akan (1997, p.135). Evidently, there is diversity even within one ethnic group, and the uniqueness within varying ethnic groups is lost when they are placed under the umbrella of “Africa”.

It is relevant here to briefly consider the question: what *is* Africa? In his essay *The Re-Invention of Africa*, Ali A. Mazrui (2005, p.74) argues that Africa is not simply a continent, but a concept which has been shaped and influenced by external forces. He states that “[H]ow Africa is defined has been a product of its interaction with other civilizations” (Mazrui, 2005, p.69). Numerous processes have contributed towards shaping notions of “Africa”. For example, it was the Europeans who implemented continental borders (2005, p.75). Mazrui (2005, p.75) also argues that racism and discrimination during colonialism contributed towards fostering a shared sense of identity among the colonised. A worthy answer to this question is beyond the scope of this discussion. Still, it is evident that the term “Africa” has roots in colonialism, and therefore can be contentious to use.

The language we use can affect the way concepts are discussed and understood. In his essay *Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy And Religion*, Wiredu (1998, p.17) argues that colonialism in Africa was both a political and cultural imposition, of which religion was significantly affected. He proposes the term “conceptual colonization” to describe the detrimental effect colonialism has had on African religious, spiritual, and philosophical conceptual frameworks (1998, p.33). He points out that there are

conceptual limitations to the languages we use to philosophise, highlighting a barrier in attempting to understand African philosophy and spirituality through the lens of the English language (1998, p.18). Wiredu (1998, p.23) criticises particularistic studies, for example “the Akan concept of God”, suggesting that they have a tendency to assimilate African concepts with Western ones. Discussing African spiritual and philosophical concepts with English terminology can lead to inaccuracy and misrepresentation.

The Akan have a few different names to refer to the concept of God. *Nyame* is perhaps the most often used, and translates roughly to “Absolute Satisfier” (Wiredu, 1998, p.29). *Onyankopon* is another name which literally means “He who is alone great”. *Twediampon* is a name which means “He upon whom you lean and do not fall”. Though perhaps the most important is *Oboade*, which Wiredu translates to as simply “Creator”. He acknowledges, however, that the name “Creator” may not be appropriate, as it holds certain connotations that do not align with Akan cosmology. Whilst Akan cosmology dictates that God created the world, he is not seen as being separate from it. According to Wiredu (1998, p.29) “He together with the world constitutes the spatio-temporal “totality” of existence.” Such a description of God challenges the dichotomy of natural and supernatural which is pervasive in Western spirituality.

Furthermore, the term “Creator” evokes, in Christianity, a God who creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothingness (1998, p.29). The concept of absolute nothingness is not one that can be expressed in the Akan language (1998, p.29). To express nothingness in Akan requires spatial context. For example, one could say that there is nothing in an empty glass, but one would have to refer to the glass in order to do so. An attempt to express absolute nothingness in the Akan language would thus be fundamentally unintelligible. For this reason, the Akan God cannot be accurately regarded as a God who creates *ex nihilo*. Instead, he is regarded as a “cosmic architect”, who creates something out of something (1998, p.30). Such a disparate description of “God” emphasises the problem with conflating Western and African concepts; to translate *Oboade* as “God” is misleading. This conflation, according to Wiredu, is an example of conceptual colonialism.

Akan cosmology subverts notions of a natural versus supernatural dichotomy. Wiredu (1998, p.33) argues against the misconception that Africans have a belief in the supernatural, claiming that this dichotomy is rooted in Western conceptions and not applicable to African cosmology. The Akan worldview consists of an ontological hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchy is *Oboade*, followed by *abosom*, which could be referred to as deities or lesser spirits, then *nsamanfo*, (ancestors), and lastly, human beings and the physical world (Gyekye, 1995, p.68). The spirits and ancestors are seen as imperceivable, but no less real than perceivable matter that occupies the physical world (1995, p.69). In fact, the Akan use the word *sunsum*, often translated as “spirit”, to refer to anything mystical and non-physical (1995, p.69). The existence of this hierarchy, in itself, subverts the notion of a natural versus supernatural dichotomy. Further to this, it is important to note that the concept of an immaterial spirit is incompatible with Akan metaphysics (1998, p.33). As already established, the linguistic framework of Akan thought requires spatial context. This suggests that whilst spirits and ancestors are imperceivable, they still take up space. The practice of ancestral veneration is common among the Akan, as it is in many indigenous religions, and it is often inaccurately described as “ancestor worship”. The word “worship” forces a supernatural, God-like role onto the ancestors which is inaccurate. Instead, the ancestors act as a bridge between humans and the spiritual realm, and ancestral veneration is a means of maintaining a relationship through which the ancestors offer protection and guidance to the living (Ayim-Aboagye, 1996, p.11). Misconceptions about Akan, and in a wider sense African, cosmology and philosophy are the result of the imposition of English words and terminology, which creates and perpetuates misunderstandings and fallacies.

The term “traditional” has also been criticised for implying that African religious beliefs and practices are fixed and essentially stuck in the past (Grillo, Klinken and Ndzovu, 2019, p.17). It diminishes the contemporary relevance of such practices. Use of the word “traditional” seems to inevitably create a dichotomy of traditional versus modern. Gyekye (1997, p.218) argues that this polarity is founded on inaccuracies. For example, no human society, no matter how seemingly traditional, is completely unchanging and unevolving. Likewise, even the most seemingly modern societies observe certain

traditions. For this reason, such a binary categorization of societies is inherently flawed and misleading. The issue here is that the word “traditional” tends to evoke certain impressions of something that is static and unevolved. On the contrary, tradition is ever evolving. Gyeke (1997, p.220) explores the difference between tradition and culture, terms which both relate to socially inherited beliefs and practices and are often used interchangeably. He concludes that culture evolves into tradition, but not all cultural products become traditions (1997, p.220). Thus, he proposes a definition of tradition which he describes as “any cultural product that was created or pursued by past generations and that, having been accepted and preserved, in whole or in part, by successive generations, has been maintained to the present” (1997, p.221). Far from being something rigid and static, such a definition emphasises the dynamic and adaptable nature of tradition. Although this definition of tradition quite accurately relates to indigenous religions, the word “traditional” has not quite shaken the association of being something rigid and unchanging.

The dichotomy of traditional versus modern could be attributed to colonialism. Philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe (1988, p.2) suggests that there were three main methods of colonialism: the acquisition and exploitation of lands, domination of the indigenous people, and implementation of new modes of production. These three strategies formed a “colonizing structure” which, according to Mudimbe (1988, p.2) “completely embraces the physical, human, and spiritual aspects of the colonizing experience”. He goes on to say that this colonizing structure produces a dichotomizing system, in which a number of “paradigmatic oppositions” emerge (1988, p.4). The traditional versus modern dichotomy is one such paradigmatic opposition, as well as oral versus written, and agricultural versus urban societies. Therefore, it could be argued that use of the word “traditional” in the context of “ATR” perpetuates this colonizing structure by reproducing this dichotomizing system.

The word “traditional” creates a divide between indigenous religions and so-called world religions such as Christianity. David Owusu-Ansah and Emmanuel Akyeampong (2019, p.4) explore religious pluralism in Ghana where historically, Christians, Muslims, and indigenous practitioners have coexisted peacefully. Whilst some scholars attribute this

peaceful coexistence to the accommodative abilities of Christianity and Islam, Owusu-Ansah and Akyeampong argue instead that it was the strength of indigenous cosmology that shaped positive inter-religious relations (2019, p.3). They poetically state that “the color [sic] of water is really a reflection of the soil over which it flows” (2019, p.3). Power in traditional Ghanaian society was derived not only from political authority, but by religious leadership (2019, p.6). The ongoing prevalence of chieftaincy in modern day Ghana has ensured the survival of indigenous practices as well as fostered an environment of religious tolerance (2019, p.6). Dr. Peter Kwasi Sarpong, as cited by Owusu-Ansah and Akyeampong (2019, p.6), suggests that “indigenous religion has not been a source of religious conflict in Ghana because it does not have a ‘Book’ that says categorically this or that.” The absence of an official written scripture is one way in which indigenous religions can foster an environment for peaceful religious pluralism, as it allows for flexibility and adaptability.

Perpetuating a dichotomy of traditional versus global religions results in misleading information relating to religiosity in Ghana. Quantitative findings state that 71% of the population of Ghana are Christian, whilst 20% are Muslim, and only 3% “adhere to indigenous or animistic religious beliefs” (U.S. Department of State, 2022). This is, however, inaccurate information. Research has found that many individuals in sub-Saharan Africa who are deeply committed to Christianity or Islam also continued to practice elements of their indigenous religion (2019, p.5). It is not the case that those who convert to Christianity or Islam abandon their indigenous beliefs and practices. Consequently, the statistic of 3% is likely much higher. The term “ATR” reinforces strict boundaries which present an inaccurate picture of religiosity in Africa. It inaccurately presents indigenous religions as something “other” than Christianity and Islam, with which they cannot coexist.

The word “religion” is also contested in the context of ATR. One could argue that it is a eurocentric term. “Religion” as a category is based on European languages and cultures; the term likely does not have a direct equivalent in other parts of the world (Bowie, 2000, p.22). Indigenous African beliefs and practices tend not to fit neatly into the Western category of “religion”. For example, there are usually no historical founders

such as Jesus or the prophet Mohammed, nor any ultimate religious authority such as the Pope (Grillo, Klinken and Ndzovu, 2019, p.18). There also tends not to be any sacred scripture (2019, p.18). African philosophical thought tends to be infused in myths, songs, beliefs, customs, rituals and practices, art, etc., rather than written down in a formal doctrine (Gyekye, 1995, p.13). The Akan, for example, have been known to express their religious and philosophical ideas through art (1995, p.13). According to Quarcoopome (1997, p.137), art for the Akan does not simply fulfil aesthetic purposes, it also reflects a complex system of thought. It is commonplace for African traditions to be maintained orally rather than through written form (Olupona, 2014, p.5). This results in flexibility and adaptability. Akan oral traditions are ever-evolving and their meanings change; thus the application of oral tradition to visual works of art may reflect shifting social and political attitudes and thought (1997, p.137). This emphasises the adaptability and versatility of African indigenous religions which is a characteristic not commonly found in so-called world religions.

Use of the word “religion” creates a dichotomy of sacred and secular. It is common in Western societies for there to be a separation between church and state, with religion remaining in the private sphere (Olupona, 2014, p.1). In African societies, however, religion is infused into every aspect of daily life (2014, p.1). Religion is not seen as an entity which can be isolated (2014, p.2). This is certainly true for the Akan. Kofi Asare Opoku, as cited by Gyekye (1995, p.129), states that “[T]he phenomenon of religion is so pervasive in the life of the Akan, and so inextricably bound up with their culture, that it is not easy to isolate what is purely religious from other aspects of life.” This suggests that, for the Akan, religion is something intangible and elusive; to describe it as “religion” is to force something which cannot be contained into a box.

There are numerous reasons why the term “African Traditional Religion” is contested. The language that we use is powerful as it affects how we conceptualise the world. Wiredu’s notion of “conceptual colonization” describes how indigenous concepts and ideas have been affected by colonialism and highlights why it is important and necessary to examine the language and terms we use. Use of the word “African” is too

broad to refer to the multitude of diverse beliefs and practices that exist within the continent. The borders of the continent were determined by Europeans, and so use of the word “African” is an act of continuing to impose European parameters. The term “traditional” is problematic as it creates a dichotomy of traditional and modern. The word carries connotations of something that is static and unchanging. However, indigenous beliefs and practices in Ghana have survived through the imposition of world religions such as Christianity and Islam, which is testament to the adaptability of indigenous religions. Many Christians and Muslims in Ghana continue to practice indigenous religions, demonstrating how so-called traditional religions and world religions cannot be easily separated. The notion of “religion” itself is a European concept. Many indigenous religions, however, fall outside typical definitions of religion. The word “religion” creates another dichotomy of sacred and profane which is not particularly applicable to African practices. For the Akan, religion permeates every aspect of life, and so what is religion and what is not cannot easily be distinguished. The term “African Traditional Religion” is unsuitable as it perpetuates several rigid dichotomies from which indigenous religion and philosophy deviates. Deconstructing these dichotomies imposed by Europeans is a decolonising method, allowing us to explore the multitude of colours that are revealed when we look beyond the black and white.

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