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# Continuity, Change and Methodology in African Traditional Religions

Louis *Ndekha*, Rhodian *Munyenye* & Judith *Bachmann*

## Abstract

Over the years, the study of religion has undergone a significant transformation. For a long time, religion, mainly African Traditional Religions, were studied as independent phenomena, unconnected to other social reality. However, today, there is increasing recognition of the intricate relationship between religious practices and other social phenomena and the corresponding need to undertake the study of ATRs within the larger context of other societal factors. This chapter introduces the dynamics of the study of ATRs, the possible methodologies that can be employed to analyse this great religion, and how the motif of continuity and change is captured across the length of the volume. Introduction

One of the recurring issues in the contemporary study of religion is the question of continuity and change. It is taken *a priori* in religious studies that intrinsic to religious traditions are elements that remain constant, which by implication represent the core elements of the religions, and those aspects of the religions which are subject to change. It is also axiomatic that ATRs are intrinsically tied to what it means to be African. While the essence of what it means to be African remains constant, the African experience, which constitutes Africa's interaction with itself and other external forces, has been subject to many forces and consequent changes. ATRs, as integral aspects of the African experience, have also been subject to forces that either tested their resilience or, in some cases, threatened to tear them apart. The influence of these contradicting forces result in significant changes in the understanding and practice of some of their unique elements. This chapter discusses dimensions of continuity and discontinuity in ATRs and the methodological approaches used in the study of ATRs. The central argument in the chapter, which is picked up later in the rest of the chapters, is that, like any other religion, ATRs have remained resilient even in the context of social change. Yet, this resilience partly comes from the religion's ability to adapt and change. The chapter, then analyses the operational term of ATRs used in the present volume,

discusses different methodological approaches that can be used to understand these processes of continuity and change in the ATRs.

## Continuity and Change in ATRs

One of the characteristic features of traditional African societies was the unity of things that are now described as sacred and secular. Because of this unity there was no clear-cut distinction between things considered secular and those considered religious. Indeed, as John Mbiti observed, wherever the [traditional] African is, there is his religion (Mbiti, 1991). This means that religion was part and parcel of traditional African cultures, and that it was not perceived as a separate dimension of life. Some scholars have observed that in some traditional African societies, the word religion itself, as understood in the English language, did not even exist (p'Bitek, 1970). Given this background, it became inevitable for African religions to be influenced directly by whatever changes were happening to African cultures. This means that African traditional religions have changed and continue to change consequent to changes that are taking place in African cultures in general. In the same way, elements that do not easily change in African cultures continue to be expressed in traditional African religions, thereby perpetuating their continuity.

Cultures change either through what is known as a cultural revolution or a cultural drift. A cultural revolution is a sudden change, mainly due to external forces. On the other hand, a cultural drift is a change that happens to a culture slowly, whether influenced by outside or inside forces (Kraft, 1999). It is evident to any observer that ATRs have changed over the years due to the influence of other world religions, such as Christianity and Islam. Transformations have also increased due to global exchanges as well as scientific and technological advances. African cultures have constantly been changing because all cultures are dynamic, except that sometimes changes may happen frequently and at other times infrequently (Kraft, 1999). African cultures started to experience rapid change the day African traditional life came into contact with other cultures and values. One of the things that led to rapid cultural change in Africa was the introduction of European education models provided by Christian missionaries and colonial governments.

Traditional Africa did not have formal schools for children. Daily interactions transferred knowledge from the elders and experts in various fields to young ones in informal ways. Apart from informal interactions, the

other way of imparting knowledge was through yearly initiation ceremonies to mark the stages of development from one level to another in one's life cycle. While these initiation ceremonies still occur in some areas, they have been altered significantly. For example, young boys and girls now go to primary school, secondary school, colleges and universities, where necessary, before securing employment. This means that the formal school has become part of African culture so much that initiation ceremonies may no longer be considered mandatory because they have been overtaken by the school system and culture. In many areas where there are initiation institutions, it is up to the parents to choose whether their children should participate in initiation rites or not. In some cases, the children are required to attend school for the sake of their future livelihood and then subsequently go to cultural initiation ceremonies to be fully accepted in their communities.

In Malawi, for example, initiation ceremonies usually occur in the country's Central and Southern Regions. In the Central Region, the Nyau cult is part and parcel of the initiation process for girls. However, the Nyau also has its initiation ceremonies for boys. The boys undergo various rites depending on their age ranges. While the Nyau cult has remained an essential component of Chewa Traditional Religion, it has undergone many changes and adaptations (van Breugel, 2001). As an institution alongside other religions, it no longer commands respect from people of different backgrounds in a community. Many Christians and Muslims despise members of the Nyau cult, and sometimes, they clash with them due to misunderstandings and negative labelling of the cult. As an age-old component of Chewa Traditional Religion, the Nyau continues to show resilience and adaptations as it tries to bring modern aspects into its repertoire, consequent to its exposure to the material culture of modernity. This is evident in the Nyau structures that mimic such things as cars, aeroplanes and trains, which may not come from the Chewa traditional past but have been incorporated into the Nyau collection due to the persuasions of modernity. Despite the negative feelings associated with this institution in modern times, some areas of the country still utilize it for community mobilization and entertainment. Political parties have also found the Nyau dancers quite useful in attracting the masses during campaign rallies.

African traditional religions were originally very much concerned with ecological matters, among other things. In the days when ATRs were very strong, all matters to do with ecology were in the hands of religious lead-

ers. This was very true of territorial cults. Matthew Schoffeleers has observed that the loss of forests and the degradation of the environment in Africa happened in the years after territorial cults had lost their authority (Schoffeleers, 1978). For example, due to the waning influence of territorial cults, the ritualistic burning and preservation of bushes, the monitored grazing of animals in various grasslands and the control of human migratory movements are no longer dealt with from a religious point of view. In many parts of Malawi today, big trees are mostly preserved in graveyards due to these places' association with traditional religion. Apart from this, there are no more instances that indicate the influence of territorial cults from the heydays of ATRs. However, in terms of continuity, there are times when the few remaining adherents of ATRs sometimes organize religious ceremonies to placate the spirits of their ancestors, especially during crises such as drought in the context of sole reliance on rainfed agriculture. It is in such situations that we see neo-primal religions such as *Chipembedzo cha Makolo Achikuda* (African Ancestors Religion) taking the lead in organizing sacrifices and libations to prove the efficacy of ATRs in a nostalgic fashion (Chakanza, 2002).

In some parts of Malawi, there are traditional ways of dealing with what are perceived to be spiritual maladies. In northern Malawi, for example, a specific dance called *vimbuza* was performed therapeutically as it is believed to exorcise people troubled by evil spirits. While this phenomenon was widespread among the Tumbuka people in the past, these days, it has become rare. Some chiefs do not even want *vimbuza* to be performed in their villages as they consider it evil either because of their Christian convictions, or due to their scientific outlook on life. In some cases their negative attitude towards the traditional dance may stem from both factors. It is no wonder that today, *vimbuza* is mainly performed by dancers who want to entertain people. Recognizing its unique performance and heritage, UNESCO declared *vimbuza* an intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2008). This recognition promotes the survival of *vimbuza* on the entertainment plane, while its usage as a therapeutic dance has gone down, changing its functions due to the influence of world religions, modernity and medical science.

Many traditional African ways of health and healing are still being practiced though. Some of them have found new expression in some African Independent Churches (AICs), especially those AICs that more readily incorporate several traditional ways of health management and healing in their spirituality. In this regard, the traditional healer (*singa'nga*, not to be

mistaken with a witch doctor!) is still prevalent in rural and urban Africa despite the campaign by some Christian groups to shun such a healer. In some African countries, the traditional healer joins associations, which unite healers and help them to lobby with the government and other stakeholders in promoting the profession. Many traditional healers have modernized their ways of processing and marketing traditional medicine. In some African countries, people involved in dispensing traditional medicine have resorted to plying their trade in the streets or some designated herbal clinics. This is very different from how things happened in the past when people usually visited traditional healers clandestinely.

In spite of facing tough opposition from Christian faith healers and medical science, traditional healers are still able to satisfy a significant number of their clientele in combating barrenness and impotence, enhancing bedroom prowess for both men and women and providing love potions, business charms and protection from various perceived harms that can befall a person. In this regard, ATRs are still responding to African health, wealth, and vitality needs, albeit in ways that resonate with the changing times. It is interesting to note that practitioners of traditional medicine have quickly adapted to the new culture of advertising. They are able to advertise their medicines and concoctions in newspapers<sup>1</sup>, on the radio, on social media and various other avenues that equally advertise a myriad of businesses. In Malawian urban areas, for example, the blaring of public address systems on top of minibuses and vans advertising medicines associated with indigenous knowledge is becoming a common experience.

African traditional religions have persisted despite all the odds. Some scholars even argue that the proliferation of prophetic churches in Africa that emphasize such things as exorcisms, personal prophecies, declarations of prosperity and well-being are a response to African needs in such areas that can be traced back to traditional spirituality as expressed in African traditional religions. The African concept of God and even the identity of God have continued not only among adherents of African traditional religions but even – though sometimes subtly and in a transformed way – among adherents of religions such as Christianity and Islam (Ogbonna, 2020). For example, the name for God in many translations of the Bible into African languages is the same name used in African traditional religions. In this case, the African understanding of God continues to be

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<sup>1</sup> Newspaper adverts of traditional healers can actually be found in West African newspapers from the late 19th century on.

relevant even though the traditional institutions that nurture such knowledge have given way to other religious practices, except in their sporadic reappearances during life's crises. In the same vein, the cult or veneration of the ancestors is still there among African peoples, though they no longer celebrate the ancestors or interact with them in the way they used to do in the past. We, therefore, argue that the most essential elements of African traditional religions, namely God and the ancestors, are still intact in African spirituality, but altered in various ways because of the changes that have taken place and continue to take place in Africa.

As it is true that African traditional religion is part and parcel of African culture, ATRs are evolving with the ever-changing African culture. African people continue to make choices that they perceive to be relevant to them, whether these choices be influenced by modern or traditional socio-cultural elements. Given this observation, whether modern Africans are members of world religions like Christianity and Islam or members of non-religious or even anti-religious groups swayed by secularism and modernity, their cultural identity is influenced by ATRs in one way or the other. ATRs, therefore, are a force to reckon with because they are not something that has been left in our distant past but something that is still with us today, albeit in different ways due to the impact of our different socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, this should inform Africans not to abandon everything that is not from their traditional past to maintain a supposed purity of identity as Africans; that kind of cultural romanticism will not help the Africans of today. On the contrary, the African religio-cultural landscape is constantly changing, and Africans must, just like the rest of the world, embrace what is good from their traditional past while discarding elements that they deem no longer appropriate. In the same vein, they must critically assess in order to embrace the good from other cultures and traditions while rejecting those elements that may be detrimental to their wholesome development as a people. To that end, revisiting ATRs and re-evaluating them, given contemporary realities, must remain a necessary academic endeavour by African scholars of religion, hence the importance of the present volume.

## **Revisiting the Nomenclature of ATRs**

One of the issues that we need to grapple with in our understanding of ATRs in contemporary times is whether the name ATR(s) still makes sense. When the missionaries and other European settlers came to Africa,

they described the African religions as traditional religions because to them, these religions were relics of the (African) past and were, therefore, traditional. However, since their encounter with Europeans and Americans, Africans created and re-created their religious practices in response to the Western incursion, whether they accepted Christianity or not. For example, the African Ancestors Religion (AAR) mentioned earlier was only founded in 1959. It is not from a traditional past. However, it can be described as a neo-primal religion. All neo-primal religions in Africa are not traditional religions in the sense that they come from the past, but they are revivalist religions that try to revive and glorify traditional religions. Consequently, there is a need to have a name that can embrace both traditional religions and the revivalist movements, which are known as neo-primal religions. In this regard, an all-embracing term for religions that have their origins in Africa, irrespective of when they came on the scene, would be African Traditional Religions (ATRs). In our quest to revisit ATRs, we are convinced the name ATR is most appropriate for the phenomenon.

## **Methodological Approaches to the Study of ATRs**

The chapters in the present volume take diverse approaches to the study of ATR. The different approaches employed reflect the constantly changing context of the study of ATRs and the implications on how to approach the religions. It is, however, noteworthy that one of the weaknesses in the contemporary learning and teaching of ATRs is that many students, and sometimes even lecturers, do not know the different approaches to studying ATRs. As lecturers, we delve into what we know to be facts about ATRs without appreciating the approaches that unearthed those facts. ATRs are not a subject in themselves. On the contrary, they are merely phenomena which can be studied from various angles. These approaches then, produce the subject of ATRs. It is crucial to know how to approach one's study of ATRs and to appreciate the approach that a researcher or author used in their study of ATRs when we are reading their works. Below are some of the approaches to the study of ATRs.

### ***The Evolutionist Approach***

Influenced by Darwinian evolution in Biology, some scholars of religion attempted to understand all religions from an evolutionist point of view. These scholars hypothesized that African Traditional Religions (ATRs)

were among the most primitive of all religions. These Western imperialist scholars were of the view that their religion or religions from technologically advanced Europe were at the summit of religious development while African religions were on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder. This approach to the study of African Traditional Religions did not live long. At the peak of European colonialism, new approaches to studying ATRs appeared.

### ***The Anthropological Approach***

African Traditional Religions have been and continue to be studied from various angles. It must be noted that the first group of people interested in studying ATRs were Christian missionaries. Applying anthropological methods, these missionaries studied ATRs and African cultures, in general, to understand better the people they were serving. This means that the study of ATRs from an anthropological point of view was a means of Christian evangelization (Kraft, 1997). On the other hand, this approach also helped the European colonizers to administer the indigenous people, which they could not do without understanding them anthropologically (Chidester, 1996). The anthropological method has, therefore, been criticized as being oppressive in that it aimed to disarm the autochthones. The subjects of anthropology were at the mercy of the colonizers, who had access to every mystery of their lives. The anthropological approach is still very relevant in the studies of ATRs despite its historical affinity to colonialism.

### ***The Theological Approach***

African traditional religions have also been studied from a theological perspective by both Western missionaries and African Christian scholars. Some African Christian scholars, especially those with evangelical convictions, considered ATRs as *preparatio evangelica*, meaning a preparation of the gospel. This was understood in the same way the Jewish scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament were perceived by Christians as a preparation for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, among the Jews of the first century. This approach to the study of ATRs does not do justice to the phenomenon, as it only evaluates ATRs vis-a-vis the Christian faith (Mbiti, 1991). On the one hand, this approach looks at ATRs positively because it champions continuity between ATRs and the Christian faith in Africa. On the other hand, some Christian scholars study ATRs from a theological position that does not see anything good with ATRs but view it as a

pagan spirituality that needs to be replaced with Christianity as soon as possible. This approach is derogatory and militant against ATRs, and it has been criticised for not being objective and neutral in studying this phenomenon (Gehman, 2016).

### ***The Philosophical Approach***

The philosophical approach examines the validity of the beliefs and practices of ATRs so that it can be established whether they are logically sound or not. Just like any other belief system, ATRs are exposed to a philosophical evaluation so that the reasons behind their claims and principles can be subjected to the scrutiny of reason. For example, in a recent paper, Molefe and Maraganezha (2023) provide a philosophical explication of an African religious moral philosophy. They argue that ATR embodies its own conception of ethical theory, which has implications for African ethical practices in bioethics or environmental ethics. Other studies have examined the African universe within the context of the place of man in this universe, the purpose of human existence, and man's ontology (Ihua et al., 2022). The above attempts to explain the African philosophy are presented in the context of the hegemonic western scholarship's denial of the possibility of philosophy in traditional Africa. Scholars like Mbiti (1991) wrestled with this challenge and consequently presented ATRs as plausible philosophical paradigms. It can be argued that the big questions in the philosophical approach centre around the nature of the categories used in evaluating ATR concepts and practices. Are they too western to accept the African conception of religion as philosophical? Is there a universal set of criteria that every intellectual tradition, including ATRs, can be subjected to in order for it to qualify as philosophical? Thus, the philosophical approach to ATRs provides an opportunity to place ATRs within the category of philosophical paradigms.

### ***The Comparative Approach***

The comparative approach studies ATRs alongside other religions to draw similarities and differences. This approach aims to understand the common themes and patterns as well as to discern the unique features and diversity of various religious traditions and phenomena. The advantage of this approach is that it puts ATRs on the same level as other religious traditions. The approach highlights broad perspectives on ATRs in the light of other religious traditions. For example, in a recent paper, Oladipupo and Oni (2024) present a comparative study of rationality in

ATRs. The paper highlights traditional belief systems that shape Africa's intellectual and moral landscape. Similarly, Maimela (1985) and Adeyemo (1997) studied salvation in ATRs. By doing this analysis in a comparative context with other religions or philosophical systems, the approach puts ATRs shoulder to shoulder with other religious traditions. However, the approach is not without its challenges. For example, the approach assumes that the researcher knows what religion is and what constitutes religion in all cultures. The blurred lines between culture and religion in the African context suggest that uncritical comparison of aspects of ATR with similar elements in other religions may result in skewed outcomes.

### ***The Sociological Approach***

The sociologists of religion focus on many things that show the interaction between religion and society and how religion impacts society. In this approach, the structures of religion and the function of religion in society are studied. As Venter (2002) posits, this approach regards religions as a collective name for a range of "many different things - philosophical systems, cosmologies, systems of morals". As opposed to the Marxist view of religion as a peripheral phenomenon, this approach assumes the all-pervading nature of religion and ATRs as part of a more extensive social system (Roberts and Yamane, 2015). This perspective clarifies the importance of studying them from a sociological perspective. The strength of studying ATRs from a sociological approach is that it helps to keep track of changes in the practices of the religion as reflections of the internal dynamics within the religion. Since ATRs are mostly practised rather than verbally articulated, studying them from the context of society provides valuable insight into religions.

### ***The Historical Approach***

Terence Ranger and John Kimambo are scholars accredited with popularizing the historical study of ATRs (Ranger and Kimambo, 1972). Before this approach was popularized by the two scholars, ATRs were studied flatly as if they were not affected by historical developments. The two scholars championed the historical development of ATRs as they were affected by different factors within the context in which they thrived. They, however, used the singular form of African religion instead of religions. This homogenisation of African religions has not received wide acceptance in later scholarship. The homogenisation undermines the heter-

ogeneous nature of African religions. According to Shaw (1990), this heterogeneity is a product of the paradigmatic status accorded in religious studies to the Judeo-Christian tradition and the associated view of 'religion as text'. For other scholars, an additional repertoire to this approach may also involve the study of ATRs in the context of other religions. For example, in a 1996 paper, Platvoet undertook a historical study of African Religions, which included all religions in Africa, whether immigrant or indigenous, but subsumed under the term 'the religions of Africa'. Here ATRs are studied as a historical phenomenon in Africa, like any other religious tradition on the continent. Whether this dimension can be categorised as a concrete historical approach to ATR remains unclear. However, all in all, utilizing the historical study would make us appreciate how ATRs have been and continue to be affected by developments taking place in their various contexts.

### *The Phenomenological Approach*

The phenomenological approach to the study of ATRs aims to understand the essence of religion by looking deeper into the experiences of the practitioners and the meanings they attach to their religious rituals and practices (Cox, 2010). The phenomenological approach is touted as the most objective way to study religion. However, the phenomenological approach has been found wanting due to its inability to evaluate ATRs in a way that can find the phenomenon useful or harmful in contemporary times (Chitando, 2005). The value of the phenomenological method is that it is the first step to understanding any phenomenon objectively before evaluating it according to one's lens. Perhaps closely related to the phenomenological approach but rooted in the African context is the Afrocentric paradigm to the study of ATRs. This paradigm, pioneered by Pan Africanists such as Zulu and Asante, emphasises the primacy of the African experience as a starting point for the study of African Religions. For Zulu (1999) and Asante (2014) an objective study of ATRs needs to be rooted in the historical experiences of Africa. According to them, this is the only way the study of Africa, its people and religions can be freed from European domination and the racist claws of European scholarship (Zulu 1999). The advantage of this approach to studying African religions is that it provides an alternative perspective to the bulk of studies done from Eurocentric perspectives. Yet, as in every paradigm, one has to wrestle with the question of objectivity vis-a-vis scholarly blindspots that characterise insider perspec-

tives to any scientific enquiry. Thus, while the paradigm provides a salutary balance to historical Eurocentricism in the study of Africa, it has to grapple with its own subjectivities and its drive towards blunt description at the expense of analysis.

## The Chapters in this Volume

The volume is divided into five sections; (1) ATR's Dynamic History, (2) ATR and Christianity, (3) ATR and Social Transformation, (4) ATR and Ethics and (5) ATR and Health.

**In the first section "ATR's Dynamic History,"** the chapter "African Traditional Religion in Comparison: Re-Negotiating Identity through Pan-Africanist and Esoteric Networks" wades into the thought-provoking waters of the contested nature of the ATR as a "religion". Researchers have argued that as a supposedly "European" term, religion does not fit well with traditional practices that include knowledge, medicine and everyday prescriptions. In this chapter, Bachmann argues that although ascribing the term "religion" to ATR may carry a missionary and colonial heritage, it has become useful to Africans and has been adapted by them. According to Bachmann, a critique of a term needs to include an analysis of the said usefulness and adaptation. Taking the example of the West African intellectual John Augustus Abayomi Cole, the author argues against a focus on a supposed European "origin" of religion. Instead, the "promise of universality" which is the basis of religion as a concept is only realised through the application and adaptation of religion in the works of non-European people like Abayomi Cole. The chapter specifically examines the entangled history of Abayomi Cole's concept of Ifá that did not stay without consequences in the later research on Ifá. Abayomi Cole made use of Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks to establish an understanding of indigenised Christianity as "true religion". The chapter makes the case that these networks tied the West African usage to a global discussion of "religion". Thus, even in the 21st century, Africans are part of a global discourse on religion when they use the name ATR.

**The following section focuses on "ATR and Christianity".** The first chapter in this section was written by Joseph Chakanza, who analyses puberty rites in Southern Malawi and the church's response to the practices. Chakanza observes that, although the Catholic Church's position on these

practices is one of opposition and prohibition, the church members continue to undergo these traditional rites. The tenacity to defy church rules and policies demonstrates the essential place rites hold among the Roman Catholic Christians in Southern Malawi. Chakanza advises that the church should not seek to destroy traditional religions and rites through its theology and evangelisation. Instead, the church must fulfil these practices and expose them to the unity of the saving act of God.

The next chapter under this section, “Ngoni funeral burial practices amongst Christians in Northern Malawi” discusses the funeral and burial rites among the Ngoni of Northern Malawi, who are mostly Roman Catholic. The chapter is based on focus group discussions and interviews with key informants. Although many Ngonis have now converted to Christianity, they still practice traditional funeral and burial rites in order to give the spirit of the deceased peace with the ancestors. For example, the chapter demonstrates how Catholic burial rituals are done in parallel with Ngoni traditional burial rites, such as calling on the ancestors to announce the death of one of their children, cutting hair to remove the spirit of the dead, and mingling with the dead through a beer party. These rites are not necessarily perceived to be in conflict with their Roman Catholic faith. Instead, many Ngonis see these rites as what is owed to the elders and view them as cultural rather than religious practices. All this demonstrates the abiding influence of indigenous cultural/religious practices in Africa even in the 21st century.

The third chapter in this section, “Continuing Relevance of ATR: Case Studies of African Initiated Churches in Kenya”, analyses ATR’s continued manifestation through African instituted churches in the contemporary East African community. The chapter takes a historical approach to analysing the AICs as the vanguards of African culture and religion. It traces the emergence of AICs and religious practices from the past to the present. It demonstrates how the AIC movement’s genesis has its very roots in the promotion of African culture and religious heritage. The chapter also demonstrates how old and new AICs have lived up to their billing. In espousing and promoting African cultural values and heritage, they have promoted the use of shrines, ancestor veneration, faith-healing, culturally relevant administrative structure and the inclusion of women in leadership and worship. Yet, as the chapter argues, the AICs also betray internal contradictions. Some are detractors of ATR, denouncing it as not being a true religion. Also striking in the chapter’s analysis of AICs is their ethnic basis, which renders them incapable of promoting a trans-tribal

national spirit. Nevertheless, by continuing to reflect traditional cultural values, the AICs manifest ATR's continued relevance in the 21st century. **The third section** emphasises “**ATR's Social Transformations**”. The first chapter in this section, “The Modification of Traditional and Religious Rituals and Its Impact on the Adherents in Modern Malawi”, discusses the initiation rites for boys and girls as well as the funeral rites of the people in Traditional Authority Mwilang'ombe in Karonga district. Based on a review of the research literature and empirical research findings, the chapter argues that these rites have undergone modifications in modern times. To the community, these modifications have negative as well as positive consequences. Positively, the modifications are meant to limit the spread of diseases. Negatively, the modifications are perceived as causes of identity loss and social pressure.

The second chapter in this section, “Assessment of the Gule Wamkulu as a Rite of Passage Among the Chewas of the Central Region in Malawi”, discusses the Nyau, a secret society among the Chewa communities in Malawi. Their initiation ceremonies for boys and girls are considered as rites of passage to adulthood and full membership in the Chewa communities. Yet, in modern times, the chapter opines, the Nyau do not seem to be well-equipped anymore to provide children with basic education. The chapter assesses that it is due to the monetary gain of the Chewa chiefs and Nyau leadership that the Nyau initiation ceremonies continue to be practised. Thus, for Mbewe, the continued relevance of the Chewa initiation rites is more superficial than real. Yet, even then, as Mbewe demonstrates throughout the chapter, the survival of the Chewa initiation rites regime over the decades, from the pre-colonial period, through the coming of Christian missionaries to the political manipulation of the Gule Wamkulu by politicians in the Malawi Congress Party era, demonstrates a national resilience that has characterised African traditional religions in Africa.

**The fourth section** relates to “**ATR and Ethics**”. The first chapter in this section, “Fortune in the Bones: An Intersectionality of ATR and Albinism Discourse in Malawi”, argues that African religions carry some negative aspects which may instigate the harvesting of persons with albinism (PWA)'s body parts or even their killing. Crucial for these negative aspects is the so-called witchdoctor who even may be in alliance with criminal gangs that trade in body parts for financial gain. As the problem is religious, the chapter puts forward the thesis that the solution also needs to be religious. The author emphasises that the Ubuntu spirituality is at

the core of African religions and can be used to bring out positive aspects in order to protect PWAs. Ubuntu is based on the idea that no one can exist alone and that everyone is in each other's care. Here, Mawerenga demonstrates not only the continuing relevance of ATR in the 21st Century but also its perplexing conundrum. It has a social-religious influence that can be used for good or bad. However, by placing a solution to the Albino killing challenge at the door of ATR, the chapter underscores the all-encompassing nature of ATR and its continuing relevance in the 21st Century.

The second chapter in this section "Exploring Ways of Utilizing ATR in the Fight against Corruption in Nigeria" proposes ATR as an alternative option for dealing with Nigeria's corruption challenge. The chapter observes that centuries of Christian and Islamic presence in this populous nation have not helped to develop the country. The nation's legal framework has roots in the West and is therefore, as the chapter argues, foreign to the Nigerian conception of justice. This includes the foreign religions' causal approach to the conception of the deity. It is due to these interferences that the nation has witnessed increasing corruption and instability. Meanwhile, African indigenous justice systems, now privately sought after by some sectors of society, have yet to be adequately tried in the fight against corruption. The chapter argues that the fight against corruption in Nigeria could be complemented by infusing in the legal system the adoration of the Ògún or Ayéíálá as an anti-corruption ethical divinity. These alternative anti-corruption measures include the use of curses and ritual covenants such as the Ìmùlẹ̀ Covenant. Conspicuously significant for the present volume is the chapter's detailed analysis of the past and present manifestation of ATR in Nigeria, even in the context of the continuous growth of Christianity and Islam. The proposal for officially recognising the efficacy of traditional values and attributes of ATR attests to the religion's continued relevance in the 21st century.

**The last section** focuses on "ATR and Health". The first chapter in this section "From the Bush to Social Media: Dynamics in the Practice of Traditional Medicine in Malawi" analyses the changes in the practice of traditional medicine in Malawi, using the research method of Netnography. It takes stock of the two-fold influence of social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp on religious institutions: religious traditions are taking advantage of development in social media and using them to advance their agenda. At the same time, social media is also changing the practices of

religious traditions. In light of the above analysis, the chapter demonstrates how traditional doctors in Malawi have taken to social media to interface with their modern media-savvy clientele. The chapter observes that, while the new platforms have increased the traditional doctors' customer base, the new platforms have also provoked significant changes in the structure and practice of traditional medicine. The most significant change is the new emphasis on herbalism at the expense of divination and spiritualisation, which are traditionally regarded as prerequisite aspects in traditional practice in Malawi. A unique aspect of the chapter is its ability to demonstrate how traditional medicine, which is an aspect of ATR, has taken advantage of social and technological changes to stay relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The last chapter of this section and the one to close of this edited volume is another Chakanza paper, originally delivered at the 1997 Association of Theological Institution in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA) conference. In the chapter on “Health and Healing: New Development in Spirit Mediumship in Malawi”, Chakanza analyses the influence of Christianity on traditional healing practices through spirit mediums in Malawi. According to Chakanza, traditionally, spirit mediums use possession to diagnose and heal diseases. Chakanza, however, demonstrates how a new set of spirit mediums, who are members of Christian denominations, adopt Christian symbols and characters such as the Bible and biblical figures. By fusing both traditional and Christian elements in their healing practices, the new spirit mediums provide a bridge between traditional religions and the Christian tradition. These practices and institutions, although not fully sanctioned by the institutional church, provide an avenue for members of the Christian faiths to access the privilege of ATR, albeit coated with Christian colours. All this demonstrates ATR's contextual malleability and quest for relevance, even in the face of dominant religious traditions.

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