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African Traditional Religion in Comparison: Re-Negotiating Identity through Pan-Africanist and Esoteric Networks

Judith ***Bachmann***

Abstract

The consensus on the term African Traditional Religion (ATR) seems to be that "religion" is too limiting a concept for traditional practices because they include medicine, knowledge, and prescriptions for everyday life. Yet, as most scholars argue, ATR is the most fitting term one could think of for lack of a better term. Ugandan scholar Okot p'Bitek criticised the likes of Parrinder, Mbiti and Idowu, who made a career of using the term prolifically and by its introduction, Christianised and Hellenised African traditional practices. ATR became a position from which one could gain entrance into the hallways of "world religions." However, the debate about the perception that "religion" may actually not be a fully fitting term at all is yet to be taken seriously in the study of ATR with regard to its historical roots and the anti-colonial/imperialist interests connected with these roots. The chapter argues that we can understand the current debates about the term "religion" in (West) African contexts better, if we investigate the ways early Christian intellectuals re-negotiated their African religious identity within Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks. The chapter looks specifically at the nineteenth-century intellectual John Augustus Abayomi Cole, who compared traditional practices to Tarot, the Jewish Kabbalah as well as to scientific research. He became a professing Theosophist and quoted other prominent esoteric figures like the Rosicrucian and Theosophist Franz Hartmann and the Rosicrucian and Occultist Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. Abayomi Cole used their arguments to promote the idea that if recovered from their missionary misconceptions, African traditions were religion and science in an anti-materialist sense. This idea served as the basis to the demand for a truly indigenous church that would be free from missionary oversight, a demand which was highly popular in West Africa at the turn of the century. The chapter thus concludes that in order to understand today's struggle to define African traditional practices, scholars have to take into account the history of comparison in which Africans were engaged early on.

Introduction

African traditional religion (ATR) is often seen as a term that does not quite fit but has continued to stick. It is criticised for the suggestion that there is only one religion across Sub-Saharan Africa,[1] for the concomitant homogenisation of the diverse practices subsumed under its umbrella and for its colonial and missionary heritage (Olabimtan, 2003; p'Bitek, 1980; p'Bitek & Wiredu, 2011). Scholars have also pointed out that “religion” in Africa is not segregated from the rest of social life like in the West (Olabimtan, 2003; Olupona, 2014). Yet, scholars continue to use it for lack of a better term which could serve the same function: namely the acknowledgement that practices across Africa continue to be identified as “religious” and that via a complicated history of conquest, domination and decolonization, these traditional “religious” practices are still seen as somehow related or connected to each other. In a way, this dilemma of ATR is not so different from the dilemma of the term “religion”. Religion is used as a self-identifier and/or a negative foil worldwide, but within the study of religion, usage of the term has received criticism (Bergunder, 2016b, pp. 34-35). This criticism stresses that “religion” was a European term first, then in a second step it was applied by European traders, missionaries, settlers, and colonial administrators to other contexts. “Religion” was a term of domination (Chidester, 2014). Local terms should be preferred, some scholars stress (Chitando, 1997, pp. 92-93; p'Bitek & Wiredu, 2011, xxiii), and no doubt, local terminology needs to be studied. Yet, if local terms are only studied as exclusively connected to a supposedly local worldview and not in their relation to “religion,” the danger occurs that people who use these local terms are treated as isolated islands. Thus, Africans are perceived as ignorant of global discourses, which is yet again similar to colonial perspectives.

Many people worldwide hold on to the term and its translations, or use them to demarcate their practices, the latter of which could not be understood properly, too, if the usage of “religion” was not studied as well. To abandon the term would imply to ignore these globally entangled usages that might or might not concur with European usages. The criticism that the idea that “religion” was invented in Europe and only taken to other contexts afterwards, reifies the idea of a straightforward and homogeneous European origin. It also implies that there is no usage that can transform and even subvert the “original” usage to the extent that a new understanding emerges. This chapter will unpack both these problems that can be boiled down to history and agency. At the core, it will argue that ATR has its heritage in missionary and colonial knowledge production but that this heritage was adapted and transformed significantly by African intellectuals, using Pan-Africanist and especially esoteric discourses. The chapter introduces the context of West African intellectuals in the late nineteenth century who had gained access to Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks. The ideas common in these networks were strategically used by West African intellectuals to play into missionary anxieties about atheism in order to demand an independent church. Ultimately, the ways in which West African intellectuals used “religion” with a specific focus on African practices show that European and North American discourses on religion were not homogeneous and that these different competing positions made it possible for West Africans to adapt parts of them for their own strategic interests. ATR thus has to be placed in a global religious history to understand how African actors arrived at “religion” and what their understandings and interests were by adopting this term. Does this mean that “everything in Africa is religious”? A binary conception of either exclusive presence or absence of religion will only serve researchers, if either is connected to a preconceived value (e. g. religion= good because it preserves morality; no religion= good because it is progressive and scientific). Rather, the chapter aims to demonstrate the intricacies of debates on “religion” and how West Africans exerted their agency to demarcate their position within it.

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[1] Jacob K. Olupona (2014) has therefore chosen the plural instead of the singular.

The chapter is divided into two main sections, the first of which will discuss the theoretical problem of “religion” as a term and whether it can be used anywhere else but in Europe, and how this debate reflects best in the case study of Ifá, the Yoruba divination practice, seen as the interpreter of Yoruba traditional religion (Ogunleye, 2019). The second section will focus on the example of West African intellectuals in the late nineteenth century who adopted the term but under the impression of Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks. These networks were used to exploit missionary anxieties to negotiate for an independent church, but they also transformed the understanding of certain practices like Ifá. Ultimately, the chapter contends that African Traditional Religion needs to be studied within a global religious history, not apart or outside of it, to understand the motivations and interests employed by actors today and in the past, like the West African intellectuals, in their usage of the word “religion”.

Religion in Comparison

Religion: The Foreign Category?

The first significant critique of the category of “religion” came from the Ugandan philosopher and writer Okot p’Bitek. He contended that religion in Africa had not been studied according to peoples’ own beliefs but overwhelmingly in light of European scholarship and Christian theology (p'Bitek, 1980). Following a turn from no religion to animism to religion within early anthropological and missionary writing, African intellectuals like John Mbiti and E. Bolaji Idowu had “robed [African deities] with awkward Hellenic garments” (p'Bitek, 1980, p. 47). Thus, they had contributed to the study of religion in Africa as a foreign category rather than within the context of indigenous thought, p’Bitek argued. The debate about whether “religion” is a local idea or only came to Africa through Christian or Muslim missionaries has bloomed since p’Bitek’s critique (Chitando, 1997; Olabimtan, 2003; p'Bitek & Wiredu, 2011). It also resonates with a general controversy in the study of religion. It has become a commonplace to state that religion only fully applies to the “Western” context where it supposedly originated, giving it a “Judeo-Christian” heritage (Bergunder, 2016b, p. 42; Chitando, 1997, pp. 79-80). Against this background, every other context then seems deficient with regard to “religion”. The rhetoric of the “Western or Christian prototype” proliferated.

However, religion is a globally relevant category. This fact is neither an inherently good nor bad thing but needs to be properly observed and contextualised. In some African countries, traditional healers have called for the acknowledgement of their practices as a “religion” (Jordaan, 2018). Are these healers victims of a Western prototype? To think that, would reduce their agency significantly. Researchers have pointed out that there are no real equivalents of “religion” or its assumed central concepts in other languages (Chitando, 1997, p. 80; p'Bitek & Wiredu, 2011, xxiii). This is specifically relevant for my context of interest here: the Yoruba of Nigeria, where “religion” was translated with “ẹsin” (worship) or “asa ibìlẹ” (customs of the country) (Peel, 2003, p. 90, 2016, p. 217). But Yoruba people, as well as other Africans, have grown up for some time with other languages which were acquired due to trade and migration, missionary-taught and/or colonially enforced. English, French and Portuguese have become African languages by the simple fact that they are readily used by Africans – and not just as puppets of their earlier colonial masters but with their own styles, idioms, pronunciation and spelling (Jeyifo, 2017; O'Mahoney, 2019). How then can English be a "Western" language? Yet, the "local" languages should not be disregarded, and I will come back to the problem of translation associated with these languages.

Let us first look closely at the "prototype" rhetoric. The prototype is a critique of the supposed natural universality of religion. Instead of being naturally applicable to all human life, the prototype implies that "religion" was originally formed in a specific context, and ever since, this context serves as the defining factor of the term. In consequence, this means that every usage of the term carries with it this original context, and that the term can never be used in any other way. If "religion" was European, it would imply that it could not be used to meaningfully explain any phenomena in Africa. Yet, that does not seem to be the case: even p'Bitek wrote that "[t]he study of African religions is one important way of understanding African ways of thought" (p'Bitek, 1980, p. 119). Dipesh Chakrabarty described the same dilemma with regards to the "working class" in Marxist Indian thought. India lacked the same economic conditions as nineteenth-century Europe and thus, it was hard, indeed impossible, to identify a working class in India that was not deficient in some ways (Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 31-32). Yet, the same problem applied to every term in the social sciences in India: Europe as an epistemic regime was "a much more profound theoretical condition" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 29). But Chakrabarty also pointed out that "*we* [emphasis in the original] find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of 'us,' eminently useful in understanding our society" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 29). This "usefulness" needs to be considered in more detail because it explicates a paradox at the core of the prototype. The prototype is a comparative category. As we have seen from p'Bitek's critique: "religion" is supposedly applied according to "Western Christian" standards. Yet, its identity as prototype becomes relevant only during or after its application in a "foreign" context. We could also frame the paradox like this: "religion" is "Western," yet this very fact never played a role when it was only applied to "Western" contexts. But by its application elsewhere, the assumption that religion is universal also becomes plausible (Sakai, 2013). It is a universality that has to be performed rather than one that is already given, and the criticism reveals its origin as a particularity. But that does not diminish the effects of the promise of universality.

The revelation of particularity, if done in a dichotomous way, however, runs into the danger of another supposed universal: the assumption of static culture boundaries. A proper critique of European and North American dominance in knowledge production cannot lead into relativistic notions, declaring African countries the opposite of whatever is regarded as “European” or “Western.” This will ultimately end in orientalist ideas of Africans, frozen in time, very similar to the colonial knowledge produced about African people. Instead, to overcome essentializing dichotomies of “religion” – “no religion,” “African” – “Western,” I suggest following the ways in which “religion” has been appropriated and made useful by African actors. Doing that, I do not imply that religion is naturally universal; however, I also do not take it for granted as statically “foreign.” I take it as the global comparative category that it is but taking leave from the act of comparison rather than from its first mention. It is this very act that potentially positions it as a particular (“Western” notion in a “foreign” context) and, at the same time, promises a universality (applicable to more than the context of its first mention). I think the global career of the name “religion” lies in this very promise of universality. I will explain how this way of analysis (focusing on the usage or application of “religion” rather than its supposed origin/first mention) could apply and what it entails, taking the example of Ifá, the divination practice among the Yoruba, and paying specific attention to agency and translation.

Ifá: No Religion at all?

Ifá is a divination practice among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, related to practices in neighbouring countries like Togo and Benin as well as across the Atlantic in the Americas. Practitioners manipulate either a chain of eight halfs of stylized or real *opele* seeds or sixteen separate palm nuts (*ikin*) with a tray of sand (*opon*) to diagnose ills and suggest solutions (Ajala, 2013). Practitioners also need to be well-acquainted with the Ifá corpus which consists of 256 verses. Different verses are applied depending on the formations which the practitioner discerns in the way the *opele* or *ikin* fall and translate to prints in the sand. Yet, most of the scholarship on Ifá focuses on the knowledge exposed by the practitioners through the usage of the totality of these verses, the so-called Ifá corpus (Abimbola, 1977; Adegbindin, 2014; Ajala, 2013; Bascom, 1999 [1969]; Meyer & Bede-Fagbamila, 1997). This knowledge, many claim, is not limited to religion.

Aderemi Sulaiman Ajala called it “an encyclopedia of Yoruba medicine” and “all-encompassing practice” (Ajala, 2013, p. 136). The Yoruba author Wole Soyinka (2008) argued that Ifá demonstrated best the inherent Yoruba capacity for tolerance and modern secularism. Unlike Islam and Christianity, which he claimed were exclusivist “foreign” enterprises, keen to evangelise any “unbeliever”, Ifá exposed the indigenous knowledge of the limited human intellect. “Ifá’s tenets are governed by a frank acknowledgement of the fact that the definition of Truth is a goal that is constantly sought by humanity, that existence itself is a passage to Ultimate Truth, and that claimants to possession of knowledge are, in fact, the greatest obstacles to the attainment of Truth” (Soyinka, 2008, p. 41). Earlier than that, the spokesperson of the traditional *òrìṣà* religion explained that Ifá was not based on spirit possession as other African religious practices: “Ifá is the only Òrìṣà who does not ‘possess’ his devotees overtly; instead he can inspire them” (Abimbola, 2003 [1997], p. 26). Newer scholarly literature stresses the philosophical nature of Ifá (Adegbindin, 2014). So generally, Ifá is regarded as more truthful and knowledgeable than Christianity and Islam; it is perceived as rational and learned, as an inspiration rather than a possession. It is also taken as the explanatory lens of Yoruba religious practices and culture in general, oftentimes treated as their mouthpiece, their logic or rationale (Ogunleye, 2019).

What is significantly missing from scholarship on Ifá is a historical perspective. If history is considered, the Ifá corpus is thought to provide the source of that history. Thus, it seems Ifá has no trajectory beyond its own source material, and has not undergone significant transformations, as if what is known of Ifá today, was always known about it. With this chapter, I want to provide a different perspective on what is known today as the outcome of global entanglements, and comparative practices. I will demonstrate in the next section that the conviction that Ifá is a rational, scientific practice, and not only offers religious but complete knowledge, is a position that has a history. I trace it back to the context of West African intellectuals around 1900. In this context, Ifá was compared to esoteric ideas on Kabbalah, and science. It was embedded in the struggle to define religion along non-materialist lines. This leads us back to the usefulness of the category of religion. Religion, as I will show, became a useful signifier to West African intellectuals within Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks due to the advancements in science and the missionary education which excluded them from this up-to-date scholarship of the mid- to late nineteenth century. “Religion” was useful to counter but also exploit missionary knowledge production and concomitant expectations.

Religion was appropriated in the sense that West African intellectuals used it according to their interests. This leads us to the question of agency. The capacity to act has oftentimes been connected to freedom of choice. However, within feminist and postcolonial scholarship, there was an unease with agency and freedom in this sense. Could only those subjects who acted according to their own choices, uninhibited by any form of domination, be considered agents? In other words, were women who acted within patriarchy or colonial subjects who acted within colonial rule, not agents in their own right? Their answer was a changed perspective of agency as a possibility within power relations, which also had the capacity to transform and subvert these very relations which made it possible to act in the first place (Bhabha, 1984; Butler, 1995). This implied a new perspective on power relations as well. Power was not something permanent or static but instead it relied on performance and repetition (Butler, 1993, p. 9). In the same sense, “religion” as a name came from a European context but the promise of universality, which made it powerful as part of the colonial lexicon, could only be fulfilled if it could be applied meaningfully elsewhere. Yet, every application, especially when it came through the actions of colonial subjects, carried the possibility of slightly changing what “religion” implied according to their own interests. Yes, agency in this sense may be almost invisible and might be seen as just another repetition of European knowledge, if we do not look closely at the diverging interests and possible subversion strategies.

A similar danger of invisibility applies to translation as a realm of agency. Translation is often seen as the simple act of equating word A with word B because, according to context A, word A carries connotations that match the connotations of context B for word B as closely as possible. As Lydia Liu has shown for the Chinese translation strategies in the nineteenth century, exchanges from one language into another do not work according to simple and objective matching. Rather, translation is a contested realm where a once-made match relies on later affirmations for the initial equation of words to work, or in other words: for the equation to fulfil its promise (Liu, 1995, p. 26). Translation thus comes into view as a processual but non-linear practice, reacting upon, subverting, and transforming earlier translatory matches within new contexts (Hermann, 2016, p. 104). Translation also becomes akin to comparison, relying on the power of repetition. So, if we talk about Ifá as “religious,” “more than religious” or even "non-religious," we could frame it as a matter of contested translation which plays out over time and within different social, political and historical contexts, rather than just a matter of colonial versus indigenous knowledge. The possibility of contestation and transformation implies that there are possibilities to act and subvert within relations of priorly established power. In the next section, we will apply this possibility to the context of West African intellectuals around 1900, using Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks to re-negotiate "religion".

Context: West African Intellectuals in the Late Nineteenth Century

Before discussing the sources in greater detail, a bit more needs to be said about the context of West African intellectuals in the late nineteenth century. How did they become part of Pan-Africanist and esoteric-occultist networks? Most of these intellectuals along the West African coast were Christian by the late nineteenth century. They had gone through the missionary education system. John Augustus Abayomi Cole, who is credited with having delivered the lectures we want to focus on, was sponsored to attend the Church Missionary School in Lagos (Okonkwo, 1985, p. 60). In the late 1870s, he relocated to Freetown, Sierra Leone and became a teacher in missionary schools. He was also seemingly affiliated with Fourah Bay College and graduated in 1881, though he was never officially registered as a student (Bos, 2022, p. 71). Yet, he seems to have known what was taught there. This gives a good impression of how influential missionary education was: a smaller percentage attended higher institutions directly, but the knowledge seemed to travel.

Even though these intellectuals were missionary-educated, increasingly, they found themselves at odds with the missionary leadership. In the mid-1880s, Abayomi Cole became a missionary for the US-American *United Brethren of Christ* and worked in the interior of Sierra Leone. He was invited to travel to the United States, probably by his missionary society. Yet, at his arrival, he was ordained into the *Wesleyan Methodist Church*. Back again in Sierra Leone in the late 1880s, he started open-air camp meetings, which caused a scandal and finally led him to resign from the Wesleyan Methodist Church (Okonkwo, 1985, p. 65). This resignation also has to be contextualised with other West African intellectuals becoming very critical of the missionary societies. In the early 1890s, a number of African missionaries were suspended from the higher ranks of the Church Missionary Society in Nigeria (Lynch, 1965, p. 383). They demanded a "native church," which entailed an indigenous leadership. This cause for the "native church" was probably the reason why Abayomi Cole's lectures were given so much attention in the first place. The *Lagos Standard*, where they were printed, was founded by the Sierra Leonean George Alfred Williams around 1890 and was in print until 1920 (Mogase & Ludwig, 2016, p. 237). Williams was a strong advocate of the "native church" cause, co-founding the *United Native African Church* and having his newspaper report a lot on independent churches that were founded from the 1890s on.

The criticism that was employed by these intellectuals took cues from Pan-Africanist networks that were established in the late nineteenth century. One of the central figures was Edward Wilmot Blyden who was a mentor to many West African intellectuals at the time but specifically to Abayomi Cole. Born in the West Indies, Blyden relocated to Liberia in the 1850s, where he held educational and later government positions. In the 1870s and 1880s, he was very present in Sierra Leone and Nigeria and tried to encourage educated West Africans to emigrate to Liberia as well (Lynch, 1965, p. 376). Increasingly, Blyden argued that there was an African identity binding the fate of many different peoples together. In 1884, he urged that Sierra Leone and Liberia were "two peoples [... but] one in origin and one in destiny" (Lynch, 1965, p. 376). Blyden was also a role model when it came to gaining entrance into global (especially British) intellectual society. In the late 1870s, he became a member of the *Athenaeum Club of London* (Odamtten, 2019, p. 28), a club with high society members the likes of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Charles Dickens and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. He also exchanged letters with W. E. B. DuBois, the African-American intellectual, founded journals, and published in many British, American as well as West African outlets where he often argued from a decidedly "African standpoint" (Odamtten, 2019, p. 32). These activities earned him the title of a "foundational figure for Pan-Africanism" (Jaji, 2018, p. 130).

Through Blyden and his Pan-Africanist networks, West African intellectuals like Abayomi Cole made contact with two prominent and intertwined topics: science and esotericism. In the late 1880s, Abayomi Cole made the acquaintance of other African-American missionaries working in Liberia. The African-American missionary Alexander Crummell, who was also interested in intellectual exchange, co-founded the Athenaeum Club of Monrovia, Liberia, with Blyden. Crummell introduced Abayomi

Cole to the botanist Job Bicknell Ellis. Abayomi Cole also spent six weeks in England studying medicinal plants and roots from Africa with British scientists (Okonkwo, 1985, p. 64). These were probably some of Blyden's intellectual connections as well. Abayomi Cole's specific interest in science was most likely driven by its absence in the missionary curriculum, a fact that West African intellectuals bemoaned from the late 1870s on (Paracka, 2003, p. 42). This search for science was a definite break with the missionary heritage. However, as we will see, its implementation by West African intellectuals had much to do with missionary anxieties over atheism.

The second topic West African intellectuals became interested in was esotericism. In parts, this was prepared by Blyden as well. Blyden wanted to reconcile Islam, Christianity, and traditional practices in order to find the practices most adequate to the "African Personality"; and for this aim, he seemed to favour Emanuel Swedenborg's works, especially in the interpretation of the *Swedenborg Society* and the *Swedenborgian New Church of Jerusalem* (Blyden, 1892a, 1892b). The Swedenborgian New Church missionaries were very active in Liberia and were perceived as allies of the Pan-Africanist cause by Blyden and others as they were abolitionists. The Swedenborgian New Church as well as the Swedenborg Society, propagated Swedenborg as an early egalitarian thinker, open to the idea of a divine presence in all cultures and religions. Blyden took up this train of thought (Blyden, 1892a, 1892b). This means Abayomi Cole would have likely had access to the networks of the Swedenborg Society as well. Swedenborgians like James John Garth Wilkinson, a medical practitioner, also shared Abayomi Cole's interest in herbal medicine (Bos, 2022, p. 73; Denham, 2013, p. 108; Okonkwo, 1985, p. 64).

Abayomi Cole himself also discovered the work of the English Indologist Friedrich Max Müller, probably the famous *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910) (Bos, 2022, p. 74). Both – Max Müller and Swedenborg – were a staple within theosophical works, whom a lot of British scientists at the time were also interested in (Frenschkowski, 2021). It is thus a logical suspicion that Abayomi Cole would have been alerted to Max Müller's work and theosophical texts through the intellectual British circles he had gained entrance to. In 1897, Abayomi Cole founded the *Astrological Society Sierra Leone*, also known as the Quabalistic Order West Africa, which was affiliated with the *Astrological Society London* under the leadership of the Theosophist Alan Leo (Bos, 2022, p. 75). The following year, he travelled to England again to deliver a lecture titled “Astrological Geomancy in Africa” in front of the Astrological Society London. In this lecture, Abayomi Cole also called himself a Theosophist and quoted at length from the German Theosophist, Rosicrucian and medical doctor Franz Hartmann’s work *Principles of Astrological Geomancy* (1889) (Bos, 2022, p. 78). Abayomi Cole probably got to know Hartmann through Charles Carleton Massey, who translated Hartmann’s works into English. Massey was also the founder of the British chapter of the *Theosophical Society* and co-founder of the *Society for Psychical Research* (SPR). It seems no accident that Abayomi Cole founded the *West African Psychical Institute, Yoruba Branch*, in 1901, an act, of which his inaugural lecture was printed in the Lagos Standard as well (“The West African Psychical Institute Yoruba Branch,” 1901). The SPR in England was to investigate, “prove or disprove” spiritualist practices and claims, and Abayomi Cole’s institute (also called lodge) clearly subscribed to this aim as well, wanting to explore and make good use of supernatural abilities. As I will show, another important influence might have been the Freemason, Rosicrucian and Occultist Samuel Liddell Macgregor Mathers who also had ties to the Theosophical Society in the late 1880s. He was well-known for his translations of Kabbalistic works into English.

Even though Abayomi Cole was probably a bit more eccentric than many of his peers, from the attendance reported of his lectures, we can deduce that his convictions were not singular by a stretch. His lectures of 1900 in Lagos, Nigeria were well-attended by “Bishops, Members of Council, Clergymen of different denominations, Merchants, Traders, Government Officials, Professionals, Educationists, Writing Clerks, Workmen and several Ladies” (“Professor Abayomi Cole's Last Lecture,” 1900). Mentioned by name were many who were known to be actively involved in matters of the “native church” or campaigning for self-governance against the British. His initial three lectures were deemed so relevant that the newspaper even reported on the question-and-answer session after the third lecture. The Lagos Standard also dedicated an extra article for the detailed presentation of the replies given by Abayomi Cole to the questions posed by the interested audience (“Question and Reply on Professor Abayomi Cole's Last Lecture,” 1901). In April 1901, the newspaper also quoted from his inaugural speech for the West African Psychical Institute, Yoruba Branch at length (“The West African Psychical Institute Yoruba Branch,” 1901). In the next section, I will explain how Abayomi Cole adapted “religion” from these Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks, how he re-conceptualized Ifá and how his arguments can be contextualized as strategic, even in the context of European missionary dominance.

“Religion” between Esoteric and Pan-Africanist Networks

Religion and Science: Playing into Missionary Anxieties

The first important aspect of religion for Abayomi Cole and his peers was its compatibility and congruency with science. This understanding of religion and science was specifically promoted in esoteric circles. For West African intellectuals, it served to feed into the anxieties of the European missionaries against atheism, but its plausibility also came from missionary anti-esoteric writings drawing connections between esotericism and African practices. However, Abayomi Cole and his peers also pushed back against missionary “misunderstanding” of African practices, especially with regard to science.

In his first lecture in late 1900, Abayomi Cole criticises missionaries for misjudging and condemning “All African institutions” (“Professor Abayomi Cole's First Lecture,” 1900). Contrarily, these institutions should be understood as the “Ancient Sciences of our fathers, [which,] however corrupted and buried in superstition[, are] a source of new life and inspiration to the race possessing it.” Exploring the scientific status of practices like “Sigidi, Fange, Kofong and kindred Black Arts”, Abayomi Cole states that they function in accordance with “natural laws”. He explains that these laws all work under “the Odic Force or Organic Electricity”, also called animal magnetism. This force “pervades all space, all animated beings, and can be controlled or directed by the will.” With this approach to science and natural laws, he rejects mere empiricism and materialism, saying that “we have to transcend the stereotyped empirical knowledge prescribed by the modern schools and colleges.” In the inaugural lecture of the Psychical Institute of early 1901, he goes on to state that science and religion are not opposites. “True science” and “true religion” are divinely intended to be one and the same. Once materialism is rejected, they will be “once more re-united, greeting each other as handmaids and servants of the Indivisible Creator” (“The West African Psychical Institute Yoruba Branch,” 1900).

The reference to animal magnetism is quite revealing in the late nineteenth century. Animal magnetism was a theory developed by Franz Mesmer that peaked in popularity around the 1840s and 1850s. Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, its reception was almost exclusively limited to esoteric or, more specific theosophical circles. The Theosophical Society's founder, Helena Blavatsky, saw in animal magnetism the underlying mechanism to explain all kinds of miracles (Blavatsky, 1877, p. 130). The physician Frantz Hartmann explained in his *Occult Science in Medicine* that if physicians were open to more than the physical, they could learn about "the activity of life itself, in a higher form" and employ "living power" (Hartmann, 1893, p. 77). Among the sources of living power, Hartmann counted animal magnetism, which, once taken seriously, would serve to bridge the widening gap between science and religion. The ongoing reference to animal magnetism functioned as a critique of the materialist debates that started in the mid-nineteenth century. Both Blavatsky and Hartmann claimed that religion and science needed to be saved from mere materialism as, to them, it heralded the decay of knowledge. Blavatsky accredited materialism with humanity's descent into "mere animal existence" (Blavatsky, 1877, x). Both also understood their anti-materialist endeavour as a search for truth. Hartmann wrote:

> "Neither can the materialist who denies the existence of Spirit in the universe have any real knowledge, for he ignores that which alone is real and deals only with the relations existing between phenomena which the unknown spirit produces. Real knowledge such as this [...] constitutes that *Theosophia or Self-recognition of Truth*." (Hartmann, 1893, p. 100)

In a similar vein, Abayomi Cole calls for a radical search for truth by "pious, learned and independent Negroes" ("Professor Abayomi Cole's Second Lecture," 1900).

Even though this particular understanding of science and religion as one, and the preference for animal magnetism, was clearly esoteric by the end of the nineteenth century, it cannot be underestimated how many intellectuals, even at that time, were still in the esoteric orbit and at least, knew the arguments of Theosophists. So, it should come as no surprise that they were employed by West African intellectuals, who, following Blyden, sought entrance to British intellectual circles. It was also not only West Africans who were involved in the debates on religion and science by the end of the nineteenth century. As scholarship has shown (Bergunder, 2016a, 2020; Strube, 2016, 2022; Strube & Krämer, 2020), these were truly global debates.

Why were these theosophical arguments attractive to West African intellectuals? One listener, a member of the clergy, might give us a hint. After the last lecture in 1900, he was credited with praising the three-part lecture series by Abayomi Cole for having been "highly scientific and philosophical yet [...] remarkably permeated with a Christian tone" ("Professor Abayomi Cole's Last Lecture," 1900). It was praiseworthy, he stated, specifically because scientists were in danger of "running to Atheism". The reference to atheism is quite revealing in this context. It was a common "boogeyman" in England (Franklin, 2018, p. 7). More voices warned against its dangers than confessions in its favour were made. Particularly scared were the Evangelicals who saw scientific materialism as the road to atheism (Noll, 1999, p. 108). Evangelicals made up a significant portion of missionaries in West Africa. However, this opposition to science had also only developed over the course of the nineteenth century. Around the mid-nineteenth century, it was still possible to conceive of a positive view of science, some seeing "Religion [as] the nourishing Mother of Science" (Farrelly, 2008, p. 668). Religion and science were perceived as complementary and had to be – theologically, the idea of a god detached from the world and its natural laws was unimaginable to evangelicals. God was conceived as "the author of both" religion and science (Farrelly, 2008, p. 669). Known in West African newspapers was also the Anglican cleric Frederic Farrar's work who had argued in the 1860s that the new scientific discoveries were in fact part of god's revelations (Farrar, 1868, p. 618; Johnson, 1905). Thus, 'older' Evangelical perceptions of the complementarity of science and religion under divine rule were still very popular in West Africa around 1900.

This was also due to the ongoing relevance of teaching materials produced at the beginning of the nineteenth century. One of these texts was Thomas Hartwell Horne's *Compendious Introduction to the Study of the Bible,* which seemed to still be in use in Fourah Bay College in the 1870s (Paracka, 2003, p. 42). In this book, Horne argued against critics of divine inspiration of the bible. Divine inspiration was "both reasonable and necessary" (Horne, 1827, p. 30), as issues told in the bible included things the writers could not have known. This specific argument is reminiscent of Scottish common-sense realism, which was introduced to the evangelical movement through figures like John Witherspoon and Thomas Chalmers. Chalmers was inspired by John Beattie, who argued that reason ultimately relied on common sense and intuition to arrive at truths that were selfevident (Rice, 1971, p. 29). In this sense, nature could not oppose common-sense insights. This philosophical reasoning came to be the standard in the Evangelical movement in the early nineteenth century and, through its writing, was preserved in West Africa beyond that time.

This is not to say that every West African intellectual by the end of the nineteenth century also subscribed to the fear of atheism due to science. Some seemed to await the scientific revolution eagerly. A contemporary wrote that "Christian Agnosticism [would become] the order of the day" in Africa due to scientific progress (A Christian Agnostic, 1899). It shows that Abayomi Cole and his peers could in fact take different positions on the matter of science and religion. Some tended more towards materialist science, others swayed in the direction of esoteric and, in fact, earlier Evangelical convictions of necessary compatibility. However, they definitely shared a critique of missionary leadership. Feeding into the scare of atheism, Rev. James Johnson of the Church Missionary Society made a speech in 1899 reminding his audience that European Christianity was in decline and if the same should not happen to West African Christianity, "this Church [is in need of] expanding itself, [...] governing itself" (Johnson, 1899). Another writer called "Theophile" praised "the manly courage exhibited at present by the intelligent natives of this Colony to combat the false and hypocritical position in which the African finds himself placed by the white man, politically, socially and religiously" (Theophile, 1900).

Yet, while the critique of missionary leadership and misrepresentation was widespread, missionary writing was also hegemonic in the sense that it was ever present and constituted knowledge of African practices. The comparison of esotericism and African practices was introduced in missionary texts. Missionaries compared African practices with esotericism, most likely as a criticism of esoteric convictions that were widespread in Europe at the time. By comparison, missionaries implied that esotericism was less civilised than the Christian religion, akin to "paganism". An example was Reverend P. Baudin's account (Baudin, 1885), first published in French and quickly translated into English and German. This work would have been well known in West African intellectual circles, even only by its reception, for example, through the English colonial officer A.B. Ellis (1966), whose work is cited explicitly in Abayomi Cole's lectures ("Professor Abayomi Cole's Last Lecture," 1900). Baudin made comparisons between African practices and esotericism, for example, in his descriptions of "fetish-priests": "They believe in spirits, and are strengthened in this belief by the practices of magnetism and spiritualism" (Baudin, 1885,

p. 80). This might have served as a negative foil for Abayomi Cole, since Baudin outright rejected fetishism as a confusing mixture of spiritualism and materialism, as a "complete perversion of religion" (Baudin, 1885, p. 103). This might have influenced the way in which Abayomi Cole argued against both spiritualism and materialism, however, by employing theosophical arguments of religion and science's congruency. Theosophists like Hartmann sought "scientific" explanations for spiritualist practices, thereby criticising as well as demarcating the proper practices from "black magic" (connected to animal sacrifices) (Hartmann, 1904 [1890], pp. 97-98). Arguments similar to those made by Abayomi Cole, favouring a "scientific" understanding of traditional practices against missionary accounts such as "fetishism" and "black magic", were also popular among intellectuals in Asia (Strube, 2022). Theosophical adaptations were thus shared globally.

Kabbalah and Ifá: Negotiating a Comparison

There is another aspect where Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks had the effect of comparative practice on West African intellectuals. To grasp this aspect, we need to zoom in on Ifá which today is regarded as the Yoruba divinatory system akin to the status of all-compassing philosophy, religion and healing. As discussed in the beginning, Ifá is seen as a practice that cannot be properly confined to the realm of religion, especially when compared to Christianity and Islam. It is demarcated from the possession practices common in the veneration of other traditional *òrìṣà* shrines and positioned as a "learned tradition". Taking the example of one of the lecture transcripts, precisely the one titled "Ifá viewed theologically, mythologically and scientifically," I will analyse how Abayomi Cole drew on occultist writing to centre Ifá around a negative theology, to rationalise it vis-à-vis an irrational European Christianity, and to declare it fit to serve for continuation in indigenous (missionary-independent) Christianity, different from its European (irrational) counterpart. This happened in the face of missionary and early anthropological writing, which dealt with Ifá in a demeaning manner. Thus, Abayomi Cole and his peers prepared the way for later students of Ifá to broaden its claims as learned tradition and even philosophy.

In the lecture given in late 1900, Abayomi Cole first declared Ifá "the Divine manifestation of Omnisciency and Omnipotency" ("Professor Abayomi Cole's Second Lecture," 1900), even though Ifá is not the highest Yoruba deity. This argument is followed by a series of comparisons of the

"16 figures or Odu of Ifa Divination". To him, they are similar to "the Geomantic figures of Eastern Nations" as well as "Tarrot [sic] and the Zephan Yetzirah [sic]." Then he goes into a longer discussion of Kabbalah and Ifá. Before we dive into the details of this discussion, let us hold on a minute and think about how this comparison came to be.

Even though the practices mentioned by Abayomi Cole can, from today's perspective, probably all be summed up under the term "divination," Ifá today is also claimed to be culturally distinct and tied closely to the "Yoruba worldview." How did it lend itself to this comparison? As hinted at above, we have to consider the strategies of comparison employed in missionary and early anthropological writing to understand how this comparison became plausible and how it was amended to form a counterstrategy. Baudin, again, paints it in the strongest colours, accrediting even human sacrifices to the possible recommendations given by Ifá (Baudin, 1885, p. 87). He, as well as Ellis, stress that the practice of Ifá is "lucrative" (Ellis, 1966, p. 57). Baudin also writes that it is "very similar to playing-cards used by fortune-tellers" and that the practitioners accredit "at will good or bad fortune according [sic] as they deem it expedient to better dupe the fool who comes to consult them" (Baudin, 1885, p. 35). Ellis agrees that its "chief function is to foretell the future" (Ellis, 1966, p. 87). On a less demeaning note, they both also agree that it is 16 palm nuts or figures that are employed by the Ifá practitioner (Baudin, 1885, p. 35; Ellis, 1966, p. 155). As explained above, Baudin also sees a continuity between spiritualism and "fetishism", which probably led to a theosophical re-framing by Abayomi Cole. The missionary and early anthropological usage of the category of "divination" helped to broaden the implicit comparison and drive it into a slightly different direction. The 16 palm nuts were also carried over by Abayomi Cole – even though this piece of information has been criticised as not authentic within today's practice (Bos, 2022, p. 78). We will come back to this critique.

The implicit comparison as "divination" was really made explicit with the mention of Geomancy, Tarot and the Sefer Yetzirah (*Book of Creation* in Kabbalah tradition). Dated to the late nineteenth century, this combination hints at the reception of esoteric-occultist works. Kabbalah was mentioned in Blavatsky's work. She thought that its Jewish configuration was a corruption of Eastern ancient practice (Huss, 2021, p. 107). Even though the academic study of Jewish Kabbalah dismissed many esoteric adaptations of Kabbalah as "pseudo-Kabbalah" (Huss, 2021, p. 109), alongside

Jewish scholars, Occultists also started to study the source material of Kabbalah more closely towards the end of the nineteenth century. One of the founding figures of Occultism, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854-1918), had just published an edited volume of English translations of Christian Kabbalist Knorr von Rosenroth as well as other Kabbalist source material in 1887, which he had titled *Kabbalah Unveiled*. Reading MacGregor Mathers next to Abayomi Cole's lecture makes it very plausible that Abayomi Cole might have had knowledge of this book. We can show this in a paragraph which follows his explanation of the "Oduso", one of the palm nuts of the oracle, which is not actively used in the divination process as it "is regarded too sacred to be employed." On the left is the next section in Abayomi Cole's lecture, and on the right are paragraphs from Macgregor Mathers' introduction of *Kabbalah Unveiled*:

"It represents the first point of the Sephiroth. It is Keither, the Crown; the 'Formless Form', the 'Ancient of Days', the 'Concealed of the Concealed'. ... Learn a lesson O you Divines who have limited the unlimited, circumscribed the Absolute, and reduced God to the level of your materialistic anthropomorphism. ... The Guide of knowledge is above knowledge and therefore cannot be investigated by knowledge."	"If we think about it more deeply, we shall see that such must be the primal forms of the unknowable and nameless One, whom we, in the more manifest form speak of as God. He is the Absolute. But how define the Absolute? Even as we define it, it slips from our grasp, for it ceases when defined to be the Absolute. ... 'What God is in Himself it is not given to man to know. God is the absolute of faith; existence is the absolute of reason, existence exists by itself, and because it exists.'" (MacGregor Mathers, 1887, pp. 16-17) "Kether, the Crown, the First Sephira, ... of the hidden Sephirot... 'The Concealed of the Concealed,' 'The Ancient of the Ancient Ones'..." (MacGregor Mathers, 1887, pp. 20-22)

The first two paragraphs cited from *Kabbalah Unveiled* establish that one of the core ideas in Kabbalist thought is the negative existence of the divine or the “unknowable and nameless One”. This idea is necessary, as Macgregor Mathers explains by citing Eliphas Levi, to avoid “idolatry” which Kabbalists “have a horror” of (MacGregor Mathers, 1887, p. 17). Even though Abayomi Cole seemingly does not go into the details of negative existence thought, he definitely employs the idea to establish Ifá as a non-materialistic and rational practice as well as decontextualizing, absolutizing, and thereby universalizing God in the same instance. He states: “Jehovah has no form. He has no name. He belongs to no nation. He cannot be reduced to creed, nor exponded [sic] into dogmas, for he is above and beyond all.” (“Professor Abayomi Cole's Second Lecture,” 1900) The strategy in this becomes even clearer when he lashes out against a personified “Anglo-Saxon idea of God”. He takes this image from a poems collection by the US-American writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He states that all these personifications are unnecessary in his own West African context. This leads him to say that religion always rests on “psychological” peculiarities and these peculiarities may be taken to higher stages of advancement but cannot be totally done away with. Thus, he comes back to Ifá, which he announces, in its current state, is “a corruption of the Ancient Religion and Astrology.” According to him, Ifá has been corrupted by people who pretend to know it but in fact do not, thereby accounting for the way in which Baudin and Ellis had painted the Ifá practice. But – says Abayomi Cole – with the help of the missionary, Ifá can be purified to its original form, so that West Africans “find original pegs to hang the True Religion on.” By true religion, as shown above, he means religion that is not differentiated from science and thus free from materialist notions. This is demonstrated again when he equates a purified Ifá with “the science of Astronomy” as well, combining it with “prognostications of coming events in relation to the Colony of Lagos.” He concludes the lecture by assuring his audience that it is not an anti-Christian stance but an anti-European: “It is the spurious imitation that we decry, not the original.” Christianity, at its core, is not foreign to West Africans if it is not mistaken for what he deems the European ‘imitation’ of Christianity. He ends the lecture with an appeal to his peers to rise up in search of truth and in obligation to their own conscience alone: “We have escaped physical thraldom and thus blow must be struck against spiritual Slavery.”

Recently, Abayomi Cole has been rediscovered. However, what has been pointed out is that his own conceptualization of Ifá has nothing to do with what is considered its authentic practice today. Among others, Bos noted that “there is no astrological component to modern *ifá*” (Bos, 2022, p. 78). But we have seen that this came in through the missionary and anthropological reports, which dismissed it as “fortune-telling”. Bos also admitted that this might be due to the missing codification of Ifá that would only set in later and favour the knowledge of verses (Bascom, 1941, 1999 [1969]) rather than ideas of symbolic figures and occultist knowledge. He knew the practice from the hybrid setting of Freetown, Sierra Leone. But it would be hasty to dismiss Abayomi Cole’s accounts as having no impact on later conceptions of Ifá. He had been rediscovered in the 1960s, just as the very codification of Ifá verses set in anew. Fela Sowande quoted him in his booklet Ifá (Sowande, 1964). Notably, this booklet contains the transcription of Ifá verses and, at the same time, positions Ifá in a way that sounds very similar to Abayomi Cole. He called Ifá “a System [...] not exclusively Religion, not exclusively Philosophy, not exclusively History, or Divination, or Natural Science, or Medical Therapeutics, but embrac[ing] all these and more” (Sowande, 1964, p. 6). Even though Abayomi Cole seemed forgotten, the effects of his comparison of Ifá and Kabbalah clearly lived on, giving credence to the idea that Ifá did not have to be one thing alone but could really bring together religion and science as all-encompassing knowledge (see Ajala, 2013, p. 136). His argument of the sacred palm nut and the negative existence of God might not have been employed directly again but the claims about the learned and inspirational nature of Ifá, its tolerant truth-seeking vis-à-vis narrow exclusivist beliefs can be traced back to the re-negotiation of a demeaning comparison with mere materialistically oriented “fortune-telling” and “card-playing”.

In a way, the argument that Abayomi Cole’s conceptualization of Ifá is odd and has supposedly nothing to do with authentic Ifá is somewhat similar to the debate about Kabbalah. Boaz Huss has shown that Kabbalists, especially following Gershom Scholem, have disowned the way in which Occultists like MacGregor Mathers have drawn on the Kabbalah. The “real” Kabbalah, according to them, has nothing to do with Occultist Kabbalah (Huss, 2021, p. 109). However, Occultists have left a significant impact on Kabbalah, Huss argued. Jewish Kabbalists knew occultist works on Kabbalah and commented on them, not only in negative ways. In addition, the idea that Kabbalah was a perennial, universal doctrine appealed to Jewish Kabbalists as well (Huss, 2021, p. 115). They also happily adopted the terms that the occultists used, identifying Kabbalah as “theosophy” and “mysticism.” Thus, they continued along the lines of the comparison established by the occultists. This is very similar to Ifá and African traditional religion, I argue. Even though esoteric sources are not acknowledged, and sometimes even heavily disowned as a foreign influence (Abimbola, 2003 [1997]), in the scholarship on Ifá, researchers continue to use terms that gained traction in the late nineteenth century in esoteric-occultist circles: terms like “divination”, “science”, “religion”, “knowledge” etc. Many of them are still in use today to defend how traditional African practices are religious, and not just religious, but relevant to all matters of African life.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that even though ATR and specifically the term “religion” may carry a missionary and colonial heritage, it has become useful to Africans. A critique of the term needs to include an analysis of the said usefulness. The very condition that a “foreign” term and its translations can become useful to Africans implies that its scope is not inherently limited to a certain geographical, cultural, epistemological, or ontological space. Its first mention was European, but it was not inherently limited in its applicability to Europe. This has to do with the promise of universality that was only made plausible by the application of “religion” elsewhere by comparison. As shown in the chapter, West African intellectuals made good use of that promise. Abayomi Cole, for example, argued that Christianity had to be differentiated from its “European imitation,” implying that Europeans did not have ownership of what he considered the “true religion.” So, the comparison first introduced by missionaries to slight Africans and declare them somewhat capable of civilization but not quite, was turned on its head. To Abayomi Cole, Ifá was also the proof that West Africans were among the few who had a good access to the “true religion” because Ifá employed a negative theology through its sacred unused palm nut analogous to Kabbalist thought. This re-negotiation of identity was made possible by the connections which missionary writing had already hinted at, that indigenous religion was esoteric. West Africans fulfilled these connections and thereby positioned themselves in a way that exploited missionary anxieties but also made them look better according to missionary standards. They tapped into Pan-Africanist and esoteric networks to demand a church led by their own peers, with some intellectuals founding their own churches. Their efforts might not have been effective in the sense that the missionary enterprise stopped right away, but the chapter has demonstrated that in terms of the domestication and adaptation of “religion,” their efforts cannot be overlooked. Their examples clearly show that even positions declaring themselves locally founded and idiosyncratically based on “indigenous philosophy” like Ifá, are connected in a global religious history.

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