

# 1

## West African Traditional Religions

Scanning the table of contents of many contemporary world religions textbooks, if African religions are even included, you will likely still find them classified among the “primitive” or “primal” religions that existed in “prehistoric” cultures and societies. On what basis might some traditions be viewed as the “Great World Religions” and others relegated to a precursor to “modern” history? The answer to this question lies within the peculiar legacy of the discipline of Religious Studies.

### **The Early “Scientists” of Religion**

The mid-nineteenth century birthed what was then referred to as the “science of religion.” Among the most prominent of these new pioneers, Friedrich Max Muller has been deemed by posterity as the “father of comparative religion.” Muller was a German philosopher who, among other academic accomplishments, translated the sacred Hindu text, the Rig Veda, wrote the celebrated work *Comparative Mythology*, and is said to have uttered the phrase that undergirds the central presumption of the comparative approach to religion: “He

who knows one, knows none.” While many of his contemporaries viewed religion and science as distinct and unrelated spheres, Muller made the case that one could study traditions, even those with which they were not affiliated, in a manner that did justice to both the scientific method and the communities under investigation. To be truly classified as a science, like his primary field of linguistics had become, the discipline of Religious Studies would need scholars who extended the scope of their studies beyond the knowledge of their own religions.

Several early scholars of religion took up this charge and pursued new information about cultures with a vengeance. The burgeoning field of archeology unearthed relics from long-ago civilizations and dated materials to specific historical eras with an unprecedented precision. Philologists translated sacred texts that many in the West were previously unfamiliar with. Colonialism brought Europeans into extensive contact with a wide range of indigenous peoples. Drawing on this bounty of new information, these early scholars compared religious phenomena from wide-ranging historical periods and vast regions of the world, creating intricate and massive categorical schemes that noted not only general similarities and differences in their traits such as beliefs and practices, but summed up what those traditions were at their essence and in their natural form. They carefully sorted through the data, identified cause and effect, and drew conclusions only after careful and thorough consideration of all “facts.” These “scientists of religion” rigorously adhered to the newly formulated standards of evidence collection, objective evaluation, and the comparative approach. They sought to do away with bias and false presumptions, and committed to never taking the assertions of any tradition at face value. Elements of cultures that remained consistent over time, were only cursorily changed, or failed to evolve altogether were deemed “survivals” and were analyzed as a

“living fossil” and a window onto the prehistoric mind. The ultimate goal was to discover the “genus ‘religion’ which underlay the species ‘the religions.’”<sup>1</sup>

While the early nineteenth-century western scientists of religion sought to recover the cultures of “lost civilizations,” the basis for their classifications were often haphazard, the rationale for the points of comparisons drawn were unclear, and both seemed to change at the whim of the investigator’s own idiosyncratic criteria. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Darwin’s theory of natural selection through evolution emerged as the central organizing principle for the scientific approach to the study of religion. In addition, Herbert Spencer’s *First Principles* (1862) and his notion of “survival of the fittest” extended the realm of scientific inquiry to include the phenomenon of religion. For Spencer, evolutionary principles acted upon all aspects of society, including government, commerce, language, literature, science, art, and religion. Evolution provided a structure to chart the growth and historical transformations of religion. Rather than existing outside of time in the form of divine revelation, religion was understood as a “developing organism” that changed and adapted throughout history. Massive tables and schematics of the world’s cultures were reworked into linear charts that traced the ascension of some cultures and religions and the demise of others.

The evolutionary model cemented a hierarchical structure in which, as in biology, religions were believed to evolve from simple to complex, polytheism to monotheism, and primitive to advanced. For example, Sir John Lubbock’s *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Connection of Man* (1870) found atheism to be the lowest form of religion and charted the successive stages of fetishism,

1. Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 32.

totemism (nature worship), shamanism, anthropomorphism, culminating with ethical monotheism. Morality, according to Lubbock, only existed in the final stage of development. Edward Burnett Tylor would take issue with a number of Lubbock's conclusions, perhaps most notably the lack of religion among "savages." Instead, Tylor located what he termed animism or a "belief in spiritual beings" among the "primitive" cultures. From this discovery, Tylor introduced the notion of "survivals," which he understood as elements of culture, society, or religion, such as animism, that had failed to succumb to the forces of evolution. Therefore, any religious belief or practice that could be found among "uncivilized" ancient cultures necessarily reflected an earlier stage in human and religious development. This concentration on survivals heightened the attention to "primitive cultures" because they were presumed to show the earliest moments of religious formation.

### **The Early Study of African Religions**

Rather than noting the diversity of African Traditional Religions, early scholars drew upon E. B. Tylor's notion of "animism" to establish how these religious elements evolved over time. Tylor first used the term "animism" in an article in 1866 and later in his work, *Primitive Culture* (1871). Tylor's basic definition of animism was "belief in spirit beings." He described anima as fleeting images that animated people, animals, and objects and could move between beings long after their deaths. Animism characterized primitive peoples who presumed that all matter had its own soul and believed in countless spirits. With the rise of evolution, scholars postulated that this notion led to the idea of one spirit having power over a particular realm of nature, which evolved into polytheism, which eventually transformed into a notion of one supreme God reigning over the

lesser divinities. As this analysis indicates, many scholars presumed that monotheism was the most advanced stage of evolution, with Judaism and Christianity representing the most superior versions of religion.

In his *Principles of Sociology* (1885), Herbert Spencer used the term “ancestor worship” to describe the ways certain objects were related to the spirits of the dead and how practitioners offered sacrifices to maintain harmonious relationships with their deceased ancestors. As with many such terms, the application was much wider than this definition, referring to almost any African religious ceremony. A number of contemporary commentators have noted the imprecision and inaccuracy of the term “worship,” which would be seen as blasphemous for many cultures to ascribe such reverence toward anyone other than God. However, for early scholars of religion magic was seen as a central component of African traditions and closely related to ancestor worship. Magic was understood as humans’ attempts to relate cause and effect in the natural world. Through trial and error they slowly realized that their efforts to influence the outcome were futile and eventually turned to a belief in an all-powerful God.<sup>2</sup>

Early Darwinian scholars of religion excluded indigenous traditions from inclusion in what they considered to be the “great world religions” such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity for a number of reasons. An oft-cited rationale was the lack of a written text among many African cultures. Scholarly treatments of African societies often ascribe the term “myth” to their narratives, but, in some cases, were reticent to apply the same moniker to the stories of western traditions. Part of the reason for this distinction is that African Traditional Religions pass down their

2. Alexander Begg, *A sketch of the successful missionary work of William Duncan amongst the Indian Tribes in Northern British Columbia, from 1858-1901* (Victoria, B.C., 1910), 29.

histories through an oral tradition, rather than recording it in written texts. Early western observers deemed the former as the less “accurate” of the two methods, equating change over time with less reliability. Yet, the Abrahamic faiths each existed in oral form, in some cases for decades, before being canonized in written form. In many African societies, narratives that convey religious and cultural history are nuanced over time to address the needs of the contemporary community. Accuracy is measured by its relevance in guiding and speaking to the present concerns of the community.

Early scholars also tended to frame African Traditional Religions as localized “ethnic” traditions and “tribal practices.” In some cases, Darwinian theorists even postulated that because the people of Africa were so “savage” and “uncivilized,” their religious beliefs and practices had to have been imported from somewhere else. Early missionaries such as William Duncan described indigenous communities as “barbarous, materialist, childish, and inarticulate,” and “almost stupefied with brutish ignorance, with the instincts of man in him, but yet living the life of a beast.”<sup>3</sup> This tone continued, though not as glaringly into the twentieth century, when many western scholars included African traditions in their studies, not as important in and of themselves, but as a point of comparison to confirm the superiority of the traditions espoused by the scholars engaging in the investigation.

To qualify as a world religion, some argued, the tradition must be “revealed” rather than what E. E. Evans-Pritchard called “natural” religion. This premise contradicts the ways many Africans understand religion as a “way of life” in and of itself, exemplified by the lack of term for “religion” in many African cultures. Others made the case that African religions should be excluded from consideration

3. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 1–34.

as world religions because they are not “redemptive religions” anticipating the soul’s redemption in an afterlife or lacking an emphasis on morality issues. “Primitives,” they asserted, lacked both the imagination and emotion to do so. Others maintained that to be a world religion the tradition must proselytize.

Despite their complexity and diversity, African Traditional Religions, for the most part, continue to be excluded from inclusion among the “great world religions” in contemporary textbooks. While early Darwinians scholars provided explicit criteria for their understanding of African Traditional Religions as “primal” and “primitive,” present-day authors rarely explain, justify, or feel called to elaborate upon the placement of African religions in the “premodern” section of the text. While some suggest that these terms can be rehabilitated and reemployed despite their historically pejorative use in the early study of religion, only selected cultures continue to be placed into the “primal” categories. This extreme localization and emphasis upon the “ancientness” of African religions prohibits any consideration of the ways these beliefs and practices changed over time, engaged other religions, and influenced other beliefs and practices. In this way, African Traditional Religions are often portrayed as a static body of tenets and rituals rather than living and growing world religions.

On what basis do certain traditions warrant inclusion as a great world religion? The need for binary categories often leads to divisions such as eastern and western religions in textbooks, which complicates the placement of African religions if they are allowed to be lifted from the “primal” categories. If the criterion is the number of adherents, there are over the 25 million adherents in Yoruban-derived traditions around the world, such as Afro-Cuban Santería, Candomblé in Brazil, Shango traditions in Trinidad, and Voodoo in Haiti. One could make a strong case that not only should African

religions be considered world religions, but that Yoruba religious culture alone would constitute one of the largest and most vibrant of the world traditions. Yet, because this globalization did not occur through missions or conquest, it provides a seemingly more complicated model to map onto the religious landscape of world religions.<sup>4</sup>

Although the evolutionary categories claimed more objectivity than previous models, their classification schemes were no less wedded to the religious outlook of the particular investigator, which usually placed their own tradition as the final stage in religious development. Christianity and Judaism, the religions of western, industrialized nations, were most often placed in the advanced categories, while the beliefs and practices of indigenous cultures were relegated to the “primitive” category. Today, few scholars would assert a Darwinian paradigm to understand religion, yet its influence upon the periodization of the evolution of religious traditions has left an indelible mark on the study of African religions. This legacy can still be seen in many contemporary textbook treatments of African Traditional Religions as a type of “survival” from the nascent period of the study of religion.

### **African Traditional Religions**

Religious life in Africa is incredibly diverse and even further variegated at the local level. It is estimated that there are over 2,100 African languages and dialects. With a continent the size of Africa, which is equivalent to the geographic mass of the United States, China, Western Europe, India, and Argentina combined, it would be safe to say that variety characterizes the religious landscape of Africa. Cultural and regional comparisons are complicated by the

4. Jacob K. Olupona, *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).