



Gnostic and Epistemological Themes in African Traditional Religion

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INTRODUCTION

By the late 1970s, the category “African Traditional Religion” had gained steam in a discursive environment whose growth was fomented by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Eurocentric beliefs about African “primitives” held by eminent European intellectuals. A common axiom tying these beliefs together was that “there is nothing to be learned from ‘them’ [Africans] unless it is already ‘ours’ [‘Europeans’] or comes from ‘us.’”¹ This form of reasoning undergirded, for example, conservative British statesman and former Prime Minister Arthur James Balfour’s imperialist attitude toward “oriental” Egypt in a controversial 1910 parliamentary lecture, an attitude reflected in the belief that “British knowledge of Egypt *is* Egypt.”² It may come as no surprise then that, 60 years later, Ugandan social critic Okot P’Bitek concluded that “Western scholars have never been genuinely interested in African religions *per se*. Their works have all been part and parcel of some controversy or debate in the Western world.”³

Whether we agree with P’Bitek or not, the study of African Traditional Religion from a gnostic or epistemological perspective is a fraught enterprise. It resists Hume’s and Kant’s shared insistence upon useful, morally grounded African knowledge being an impossibility, stubbornly forcing the question of what knowledge *is*—or what it means to *know*—from within an African

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religious frame of reference embedded both in the ancestral African past and in the so-called modern, contemporary present.⁴ So if, as Foucault suggests, distinct sociocultural conditions make possible the creation of diverse ideas, knowledges, theories, and philosophies, what, then, are the conditions that enable traditional (or indigenous) African religious *gnosis*, or *knowing*? How is *knowing* understood from a traditional African religious perspective? What is the relationship of such *knowing* to contemporary modernity?⁵ It seems reasonable to ask the latter question when we consider Latour's theorization of modernity as a complex state of affairs that "comes in as many versions as there are thinkers or journalists" while simultaneously pointing to "the passage of time," a "new regime," and a contentious, "revolutionary rupture in time" where there are "modern winners" and "ancient losers."⁶ Engagement of this question is buttressed as well by a growing interest among scholars across disciplines in African, transcultural, and global modernities.⁷ This question, along with the others just posed, represents the basic concerns of this chapter.

I should also note that the ensuing analysis takes its cue from the phenomenology of religion and places a heavy emphasis on epistemology. Thus, my approach to African traditional religious knowing bears interpretive proximity to studies like Opoku's *West African Traditional Religion* and Bockie's *Death and the Invisible Powers*. As signaled in Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*, a landmark work that raises epistemological questions regarding our understanding of African people groups, traditions, and thought-worlds, the language of *gnosis*, from the Greek *gnosko* ("to know"), can be useful to discussions of African epistemology given its association with "seeking to know, inquiry, methods of knowing, investigation, and ... acquaintance with someone."⁸ Even more important, terms found in the Akan (southern Ghana), Yorùbá (southwestern Nigeria), and Dagara (southwestern Burkina Faso) lexicons such as *ebisadze* ("to ascertain or inquire" through divination, a "mystical"—or "gnostic"—technology utilized by trained priests [*akomfo*] to establish materially effective communication with the spiritual world), *Ifá* (a name assigned to the divinity of knowledge and wisdom in the Yorùbá tradition, to a vast body of knowledge concentrated in the Ifá literary corpus [*Odù Ifá*], the sacred oral text of Yorùbá religion, and to a core divination system known as *Ifá didá*), and *yielbongura* ("the thing that *knowledge* cannot eat") invite scholarly attention to African Traditional Religion at the level of knowledge.⁹

And yet the scope of this chapter is guided by Opoku's admonition that the "central reality" of African Traditional Religion cannot be presented in any text, for "the reality of this religion ... defies adequate objectification, and remains a mystery."¹⁰ My argument, then, is that a contemporary *sense* of what it means to *know* within a traditional African religious environment can be established through attention to two themes that emerge upon a general consideration of cosmological details shared across a variety of African people groups followed by a more focused examination of oral religious discourse, primarily Akan proverbs with spiritual implications or references. Two themes are highlighted in the proverbs: 1) knowing as an elusive yet adaptable

relationship with spirit requiring constant interplay between the ancestral African past and the immediate present; 2) knowing as a moral crucible. We shall begin our elucidation of these themes by first making several broad observations about traditional African religious cosmologies.

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGIOUS COSMOLOGIES

Cosmologies encompass interwoven narratives, ideas, and practices that organize peoples' understanding of "the universe in space and time and the place of human beings in it."¹¹ Such accounts—or theories—of reality are found in abundance among the several thousand people groups that comprise the nearly 12-million-square-mile African continent. In virtually every case, one encounters a theory taking one form or another that understands the physical world via the spiritual world in ways that have bearing on the two themes that frame my epistemological analysis. However, we must be vigilant to avoid characterizing the African cosmologies as homogeneous in nature. They are each in their own complex way distinct, often with ample room for regional and internal variation, disagreement, and debate.

For instance, while ancestral spirits play a key role in the religious cosmologies of many African societies, it would be misleading to suggest that this importance is always the same in degree. The cosmologies associated with the Akan, Yorùbá, and Mende societies accord profound importance to the ancestors—physically deceased persons who once lived in the corporeal world but now inhabit the spiritual realm in a custodial capacity, having met—as adults—certain ethical standards instituted by tradition. From an African point of view, the ethical life is defined by successful ritual passage into adulthood, the honoring of all ritual and family obligations, fidelity to the "social responsibilities of protecting and preserving societal secrets" and taboos, productivity, and overall good character, to name only a few criteria.¹² Within these societies, ancestors can be interpreted as wise, demanding spiritual presences who wield great power in the interest of protecting the aforementioned ethical standards and the traditions that support them, even if doing so requires the punishment of wayward living descendants. The same is true for the Ndembu of Zambia and many other groups.¹³

In contrast, the Zande of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) regard ancestral spirits as far less useful, placing more emphasis on a sharp distinction between "internal and external powers."¹⁴ If we think of ancestral spirits as mediators, by which I mean that their activity impacts the bi-directional relationship between the corporeal and incorporeal worlds, then what surfaces in our discussion of the status of these spirits in Akan, Yorùbá, Mende, and Ndembu cosmology as compared to their status in Zande cosmology is an incongruence. To cite one more example, although the cosmology of the Zulus of KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa shares much in common with that of the Yansi of Kinshasa in the DRC, Zulu cosmology nonetheless involves different mediational spirits that coincide with the Southern Bantu social

system.¹⁵ As indicated by this example and the work of researchers like Augé, African cosmologies interact with and adapt to “historical change, diffusion, and local variations.”¹⁶ Far from being abstract, ahistorical inventions with no significant connection to social life, African cosmologies provide traditional yet malleable anchors that ground African communities in an orienting sense of identity and spiritual affiliation as they negotiate contemporary modernities.

Keeping in mind the adaptable heterogeneity, nuance, and meaning-making function of African cosmologies, it is also helpful to recognize two generally shared theoretical characteristics before treating the two central themes that afford a glimpse into the thought-worlds of African Traditional Religion. To be sure, more than two characteristics could be identified herein.¹⁷ However, the selected characteristics discussed below, though not intended to yield a comprehensive understanding, nevertheless acquaint us with some of the key fundamentals of African cosmology while remaining sensitive to space constraints.

One theoretical characteristic typifying African cosmology has to do with a particular ontological understanding of the corporeal and incorporeal worlds. According to this understanding, the incorporeal world is the matrix of the corporeal world, meaning that spirit, or rather the powerful, vivifying agency of spiritual beings, is the source from which all matter and life spring. In an African frame of reference, spiritual agency is the precondition not only for the very existence of matter itself, but also for the imagination thereof.¹⁸ The spiritual and material worlds, therefore, exist together in an inextricable relationship wherein each side facilitates varying degrees of intelligibility for the other. Notwithstanding these degrees of intelligibility, the relationship that makes them possible is not necessarily perceptible to the average person who lacks the requisite initiation and training. For both the initiated and the uninitiated, African cosmologies enjoin disciplined engagement of the spiritual world as a means of addressing immediate issues (illness, familial ruptures, obstacles to success, wider social conflict and upheaval, etc.) *now*.¹⁹ As Opoku’s earlier-cited statement suggests, the formless goal of intellectually mastering spiritual reality, an evanescent, fluid reality that escapes the full human grasp, does not at all factor into the epistemological calculus of the traditional African religious imagination.²⁰ Thus, initiation and training are not guarantors that the deeper mysteries of spiritual engagement will someday be *fully* unraveled.

In the Yorùbá tradition, where, like in many other African religious traditions, we find mythic origin narratives explaining how the earth, humans, and the natural world came into existence, we also find within the same narratives an awareness of the limits of what can be known about the relationship between the corporeal and incorporeal domains, even by the *òrìṣà* (deities) themselves. Connected to one narrative detailing how *Olódùmarè* (the chief Yorùbá deity and “sole giver of life”) attempted to effect the creation of the earth through the agency of *Qbàtálá* (the eldest *òrìṣà* who, due to drunkenness, has this prestigious responsibility taken from him by his opportunistic brother *Odùduwà*), a five-toed hen, and a pigeon is a story about *Qbàtálá* later growing envious of the knowledge *Olódùmarè* possesses as the giver of life. *Qbàtálá*, therefore,

hatches a scheme to spy on Olódùmarè in order to learn the secret of bestowing human life to lifeless forms. However, not to be outmaneuvered, Olódùmarè knows of Ọbàtálá's shifty scheme (by this point Olódùmarè had recommissioned Ọbàtálá as the molder of human forms into which Olódùmarè would infuse quickening breath [*ẹ̀mí*]) and foils it by causing him to fall asleep just before witnessing the spiritual mechanics involved in the bestowal of human life.²¹ A moral epistemological principle we might glean from this story is that *complete* knowledge of the relationship between corporeality and incorporeality belongs to no one. In the story, Ọbàtálá seeks a level of knowledge higher than the level allotted him by Olódùmarè and in so doing violates this principle. Ọbàtálá's epistemological humility is sternly tested by a selfish desire to possess, or master, knowledge never intended for him. He fails this crucible, and as a result is directed through forced slumber to realize the importance of holding his desire at bay by exercising moral discipline.

A second theoretical characteristic of African cosmologies lies at the heart of the first, namely, the belief that the incorporeal realm is populated by a diverse community of potent spirits. Often associated with natural objects such as the earth, large rocks, trees, forests, rivers, and oceans, protective spirits are usually communally "owned," while spirits whose power can be used to heal or harm tend to be individually "owned," sometimes in the form of "medicine."²² The categorical names of protective spirits, including ancestors, vary among cosmologies and people groups. The Akan speak of the *tete abosom*, the Yorùbá of the *òrìṣà*, and the Dagara of the *kontombili*, whereas the Ewe of Ghana and Togo use the term *tɔgbuitrowo*.²³ Furthermore, the Akan use the title *nsamanfo* for the ancestors, the Yorùbá use *egún*, and the Ewe use *tɔgbui*.²⁴ Harmful spirits are known by the Akan as *bosom brafoɔ*, by the Yorùbá as *ajogun ibi*, by the Ewe as *dzositrowo*, and by the Manianga of Lower DRC as *mpeve zambi*.²⁵

Most African cosmologies hold that human beings should cultivate strong, durable relationships on a communal and individual basis with specific spirits. But why, and to what purpose? African cosmologies acknowledge, whether plainly or tacitly, that the universe human beings inhabit is essentially entropic and hence volatile and unpredictable. In other words, the very context that makes human life possible is defined at the most elemental level by unrelenting danger, not safety, nor certainty. This understanding informs, for example, the Dagara society's perspective on the indispensable role of exposure to potentially lethal physical and spiritual danger during Baor, a transformative initiatory rite undertaken by adolescent Dagara boys in order to become adult men. An explanation given by Malidoma Somé's father in response to his son's desire to know more about Baor prior to experiencing it is illustrative of the above perspective: "Knowing Baor will not protect you ... You cannot want Baor and protection at the same time. ... Protection is toxic to the person being safeguarded. ... When you protect something, the thing you are keeping safe decays. People come into this life with a purpose that enables them to protect themselves."²⁶

Importantly, from an African purview, the main purpose of spiritual relationship is not solely protection. Rather, the aim is to provide human beings with the ancestral self-knowledge, wisdom, and power needed to effectively—but not always safely—pursue a meaningful life and thereby gain the “three blessings of a good life—*ire owó*, *ire omọ*, and *ire àlǎáfíà* (wealth, children, and long life).”²⁷ Governed to a significant extent by the felt agency of incorporeal beings and ancestral presences, the spiritual world (*òrun*) is a dynamic reservoir of insight and power that, through disciplined relationship, can be accessed and “worked” toward the goals of survival and human flourishing.²⁸ The technical divinatory process of tapping into this dynamic reservoir involves a dialectical interplay between, on one hand, the spiritual realm attested by past ancestral belief (*ìgbàgbó*) and custom (*àṣà*, which, interestingly, can connote both the “traditional” and the “modern”), and, on the other hand, the perilous vicissitudes of the present.²⁹ This brings us to the next phase of our analysis, where we shall explore several examples of oral religious discourse in view of our thematic focus.

ORAL RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY

This phase of analysis treats Akan aphorismal statements as religiously pitched oral discourse. Moreover, the analysis rests upon the assumption that such statements embed epistemological reflection. Proverbs thus emerge for our purposes as data points that allow a look at the apparatus of thought underpinning African Traditional Religion.

In our previous discussion of Yorùbá creation myths, we were acquainted with the story of Ọbàtálá, who, despite the powerful status afforded by his senior rank among the òrìṣà, sought knowledge to which his rank did not entitle him. The knowledge Ọbàtálá wanted was the exclusive domain of Olódùmarè and, as such, was unavailable to him. It slipped Ọbàtálá’s grasp even though his trickery was designed to ensnare it for his benefit. This outcome may be unexpected given the scope of Ọbàtálá’s guile. However, there is a proverb in the Yorùbá tradition that may render the failure of Ọbàtálá’s stratagem inevitable. It states, *Ìsé Olódùmarè, àwámáridí* (“Olódùmarè’s action is unfathomable”).³⁰ If Olódùmarè’s actions are “unfathomable,” then they are not—indeed cannot be—objects of knowledge. This is to say that Olódùmarè’s actions are not available for mastery by any intellect, regardless of whether the intellect belongs to a human being or an òrìṣà. “Ìsé Olódùmarè, àwámáridí” suggests that, for the Yorùbá, knowing at its highest level is arcane, opaque, and achievable only by Olódùmarè himself. To put the matter in metaphorical terms, the taller the vine of knowing grows—the existence of which is made possible by vital relationships with Olódùmarè (think of the limits placed on Ọbàtálá’s knowing capacity through his relationship to Olódùmarè’s authority) as well as among the òrìṣà and their human devotees—the more the attainability of knowledge recedes from view. Knowing, and therefore knowledge itself, is ultimately elusive.

A degree of epistemological continuity along this line can also be found in the Akan tradition. The following proverbs are important to consider here: *Obi nnim a, eye nyansakyere* (“‘No one knows,’ is to profess wisdom”); *Obi nnim adekyee mu asem* (“No one knows what the morning will provide”); *Onipa adwene nye Onyame adwene* (“A person’s mind is not the mind of Onyame” [*Onyame* being the principal Akan deity]); *Obosom na ekyere okomfo ntwaho* (“It is the spirit that teaches the priest to whirl around”); and *Obosomfo anom asem nsa da* (“A priest’s advice is never exhausted”).³¹

What can be made of the phrase *Obi nnim* (“No one knows”) in the first two proverbs? If we think of “knowing” as a relative ontological condition, then the phrase takes knowing out of the hands of any single individual (“No one knows”). Implicit in this phrase is the idea that knowing exists in the human world only as a shared, relational condition. Conversely, the inability to reduce knowing to any single subjectivity is also common to the human condition. Hence, knowing in both of these senses is a kind of thread that tethers human beings together.

And, according to the first proverb, from an awareness of the insurmountable riddle of “knowing” comes wisdom, an experience-forged keenness of judgment that transcends knowing. So when the Akan utter the second proverb, *Obi nnim adekyee mu asem* (“No one knows what the morning will provide”), what is being conveyed is not so much an expression of ignorance as it is a wise acceptance of the limitations of human beings’ knowing and of the fact that the operation of the world around us is not entirely within our control. “The morning” will provide *something*, but humans do not always know nor determine what that something is. Why is this the case? Much like the Yorùbá, the Akan understand the spiritual realm (*asamando*) to be the primary fulcrum that turns the machinery of our present reality, not natural law or human agency alone.³² As the fulcrum of reality in its current iteration, the spiritual realm does not divulge its mysteries to satisfy the curiosity of the intellect. While the spiritual realm may stand at a proximal epistemological distance from the reach of the human mind, it stands at a distance nonetheless. This is why the Akan aver that the human mind is not that of Onyame.

Still, it must be understood as well that the spiritual domain over which Onyame presides does not exist merely to delimit human beings’ knowing and agency. It also serves as a vital fund of knowledge needed for the guidance of human life. Comprehending this, many Akan priests (*akomfo*) undergo extensive training in the practice of mediumship (*akom*), wherein a deity will temporarily manifest through or “alight” (*nsie-yee*) on a priest’s body in order to deliver important messages to the wider community.³³ Such is the context for the proverb, *Obosom na ekyere okomfo ntwaho* (“It is the spirit that *teaches* [*emphasis added*] the priest to whirl around”). A paradox presents itself upon interpreting this proverb: spirit at once eludes *and* teaches. Put otherwise, although mysterious, the centuries-old spiritual reality of the ancestors nevertheless teaches the priest to be a vessel of spiritual knowledge, but not just any vessel. The Akan insist that “[a] priest’s advice is never exhausted” (*Obosomfo*

anom asem nsa da). If priestly advice is inexhaustible, then the priest must be a *relevant, adaptable* vessel of spiritual knowledge who can speak to the changing demands of the times in ways that effectively direct human action. Ergo, for the Akan, spiritual knowing, or religious *gnosis*, is not imprisoned in the past. To the contrary, it perforce keeps pace with the rhythms of time via divinatory rituals, the fecund nexus point enabling ongoing interplay between the past and the present. Along with the weighty responsibility of *akom*, Akan priests, as gnostic vessels, also shoulder a moral burden articulated in the second and final theme to be considered—knowing as a moral crucible.

The next few proverbs invite reflection on the morality of “religious knowing” in Akan society. They include *Adeɛ ye yie bebrebe a, na ato ne ɛɛɛ* (“If something flourishes too much, it begins to spoil”); *Tumi dodoo ye gyimi* (“Too much power leads to stupidity”); *Wope ɛ wohunu nneema nyinaa a, w’ani fura* (“If you want to see everything, you become blind”); and *Obosom a ɔnkasa na ye to no aboo* (“It is the spirit that does not talk that we throw stones at”).³⁴

Most things are capable of flourishing in some way. Religious *gnosis* is no different in this respect. In fact, as discussed earlier, religious *gnosis* is linked to the blessings of wealth, children, and long life, three goals toward which African Traditional Religion strives. Why, then, do the Akan warn that “[i]f something flourishes too much, it begins to spoil” (*Adeɛ ye yie bebrebe a, na ato ne ɛɛɛ*)? Concerning religious *gnosis*, I would posit that this admonition is motivated by an acute awareness that religious *gnosis* is a potentially volatile form of power whose use must be governed by a firm discipline grounded in the moral values of the community. To imagine one example, a priest’s demonstrated proclivity for selfish excess in his use of spiritual knowledge would be regarded as an *immoral* proclivity indicative of a lack of proper discipline and as a grave threat to the well-being of the community. The priest in this example would be seen as having failed the moral crucible of responsibly carrying the burden placed upon him by religious *gnosis*. His standing as a trustworthy epistemological vessel in the community would be diminished, if not annulled.

Lastly, another related dimension of the moral responsibility accompanying religious *gnosis* involves sharing. The knowledge given to human communities by spiritual beings through the body of a priest is not intended to be privately hoarded, but rather distributed for human benefit. Spiritual knowledge usually extends itself as needed, often withdrawing only in the absence of a proper vessel for transmission. The Akan priest is thus expected to openly communicate on behalf of a spirit; indeed, she has a moral obligation to do so. This is why the Akan say, “It is the spirit that does not talk that we throw stones at” (*Obosom a ɔnkasa na ye to no aboo*). While the priest is a mouthpiece (*ɔkyeame*) through which religious *gnosis* flows, the *gnosis* itself remains an invaluable *community* asset.³⁵ A pressing question the Akan priest never escapes is, “Can you communicate ancestral religious *gnosis* in a manner relevant to and useful for the present moment?” It is toward this moral epistemological goal that she must daily struggle.

CONCLUSION

At its most basic level, the analysis developed herein puts forward African *thought* as a channel of insight into the phenomenon dubbed “African Traditional Religion.” Furthermore, both African thought and African Traditional Religion are seen as being in conversation with late modernity rather than in opposition to it. Even so, we must avoid the notion that African societies have not created ideas and religio-philosophical traditions that perdure over time in stable patterns that are distinguishable from those of modern Euro-Western epistemes. African Traditional Religion presents us with an opportunity to fundamentally reimagine our understanding of what it means to “know.” What is at stake in mustering the courage to embrace this opportunity is an epistemological future inclusive of, and consequently deepened by, African religious gnosis.

NOTES

1. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 15.
2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 32.
3. Okot P'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship*, rev. ed. (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011), 1.
4. See, for instance, David Hume, “Of National Characters,” in *Essays: Moral, Political, Literary*, eds. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1875), 244–257; Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 97–116.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xxi–xxii.
6. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.
7. Some examples include P. Mungwini, “‘Surveillance and Cultural Panopticism’: Situating Foucault in African Modernities,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* vol. 31, no. 2 (2012): 340–353; Elisabeth Bekers, Sissy Helff, and Daniela Merolla, eds., *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson, *Global Modernities* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995).
8. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, ix.
9. Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 76, no. 1 (2008): 60, 71; Kólá Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006), 47; Malidoma Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 8. My conceptualization of African divination practices as “mystical technologies” stems from Dianne Stewart’s original use of the term several years ago during a phone conversation. For one

- of the most comprehensive studies on an African divination system, see William R. Bascom, *Ifá Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
10. Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), preface.
 11. Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Cultural Tradition of the African Forests," in *Insight and Artistry in African Divination*, ed. John Pemberton III (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 17.
 12. Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality. On Becoming Ancestors*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011), 115; For the Yorùbá, good character is a "conglomeration of principles of moral conduct." See Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture*, 84–86.
 13. MacGaffey, "The Cultural Tradition of the African Forests," 19.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Ibid.
 16. Ibid. See Marc Augé, *Théorie des Pouvoirs et Idéologie: Étude de Cas en Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris: Hermann, 1975).
 17. Dianne Stewart lists six "foundational characteristics of continental African religions" that are relevant to my analysis: "(1) a communitheistic (as opposed to a monotheistic or polytheistic) understanding of the Divine, which corresponds with a community of venerated deities and invisible beings; (2) ancestral veneration; (3) possession trance and mediumship; (4) food offerings and animal sacrifice; (5) divination and herbalism; and (6) an entrenched belief in neutral mystical power." Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24.
 18. Although much broader in scope with a focus on the violence and creativity of diasporic Atlanticization, the work of James Noel comes to mind. See James Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
 19. For an excellent study showcasing the centrality of healing in the practical repertoires of continental and diasporic African spiritual systems, see Kyrá Malika Daniels, "The Undressing of Two Sacred Healing Bundles: Curative Arts of the Black Atlantic in Haiti and Ancient Kongo," *Journal of Africana Religions* vol. 1, no. 3 (2013): 416–429.
 20. Somé fittingly uses the word "liquid" to describe the knowledge accessed during the Dagara initiatory rite of Baor. See Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 203–204.
 21. Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 80; E. Bólájí Idòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 18–32.
 22. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55–65.
 23. Ibid., 55; Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 15.
 24. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995), 68; Jacob Olúpòṇà's discussion of the Odùduwà Festival—Odùduwà being the first god-king and founder of the sacred Yorùbá city of Ilé-Ifè and the progenitor of the Yorùbá people—and *Egúngún*, the Yorùbá ancestral lineage masquerades, is instructive. See Jacob K. Olúpòṇà, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 229–248.

25. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56; Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 49; Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 64.
26. Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 180. For more on Baor, see Chapters 14–25.
27. Olúpòṇà, *City of 201 Gods*, 87.
28. The Yorùbá word *òrun* subdivides the spiritual world into three “regions”: *òrun-òkè* (“heaven”-above), *òrun-odò* (“heaven”-below), and *òrun-àpáàdì* (“heaven-of-broken-pots”—i.e., the region of the supernatural world into which ‘souls’ that committed egregious immoral acts are banished”). Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 131. I am also reminded here of Joseph Murphy’s use of the concept of “working the spirit” in his analysis of African-derived and Black Atlantic religious traditions. See Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994).
29. Olúpòṇà, *City of 201 Gods*, 87; Ọlabiyi Babalọla Yai, “In Praise of Metonymy: The Concepts of ‘Tradition’ and ‘Creativity’” in the *Transmission of Yorùbá Artistry over Time and Space, Research in African Literatures* vol. 24, no. 4 (1993): 36.
30. Babatunde Lawal, “Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture,” *African Arts* vol. 41, no. 1 (2008): 38.
31. Peggy Appiah, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Ivor Agyeman-Duah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans* (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Limited, 2007), 39, 62–63, 201.
32. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 86.
33. Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan,” 65.
34. Appiah, Appiah, and Agyeman-Duah, *Bu Me Be*, 88, 283, 225, 61.
35. John Pobee, “Aspects of African Traditional Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, no. 1 (1976): 11.