AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS IN MAINSTREAM RELIGIOUS STUDIES DISCOURSE: THE CASE FOR INCLUSION THROUGH THE LENS OF YORUBA DIVINE CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

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Abstract

The history of African Traditional Religions (ATRs), both inside and outside academia, is one dominated by exclusions. These exclusions were created by the colonial framing of ATRs as primitive, irrational and inferior to other religions. This colonial legacy is in danger of being preserved by the absence of ATRs from the academic study of religion, legal definitions of religion, and global and local conversations about religion. This thesis will explore the ways that a more considered and accurate examination of the understudied religious dimensions within ATRs can potentially dismantle this legacy. It will do so by demonstrating what this considered examination might look like, through an examination of Yoruba divine conceptualizations and the insights they bring to our understanding of three concepts in Religious Studies discourse: Worship, Gender, and Syncretism. This thesis will demonstrate how these concepts have the ability to challenge and contribute to a richer understanding of various concepts and debates in Religious Studies discourse. Finally, it will consider the implications beyond academia, with a focus on the self-understanding of ATR practitioners and African communities. It frames these implications under the lens of the colonial legacy of 'monstrosity', which relates to their perception as primitive and irrational, and concludes that a more considered examination of ATRs within the Religious Studies framework has the potential to dismantle this legacy.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Recent conversations about diversity, both inside and outside academia, have critiqued the Eurocentric nature of what is often presented as universal knowledge and education.[1] Within the study of religion, scholars have begun to question and re-examine the ways in which we talk about religion, and the various problems that Eurocentrism creates while studying non-Western religious traditions. More often than not, these conversations are centered on critique, highlighting the ways that the classificatory borders between the religious and non-religious reveal a culturally-specific and politically motivated way of ordering society. But the critique, in its rush to avoid Eurocentric concepts, is in danger of obscuring dimensions that rightfully merit being designated as religious in non-Western cultures, despite being manifested in different ways. These religious dimensions can be located in several ways, such as through observing the areas that are demarcated as sacred, distinct from the non-sacred, by the people within the relevant religious traditions.

The problems created by Eurocentrism in the study of non-Western religious traditions are evident when one looks at the history of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) within the academic study of religion. The study of religion has historically been dominated by a Western or, more accurately, Christian understanding of religion.[2] Consequently, the introduction of ATRs into Western

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[1] Julie Cupples and Ramón Grosfoguel, *Unsettling Eurocentrism in the Westernized University* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[2] Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 58-65

literature and the academic study of religion largely occurred through a narrow theologically-motivated Christian lens that saw ATRs as 'other' and inferior to Christianity[3], or through an anthropological one that treated them as primitive. Anthropologists and scholars in the nineteenth century, such as Edward B. Tylor, who worked within the paradigm of unilineal evolution, treated ATRs as the primitive, earliest stage of religion.[4] Monotheism (particularly represented by Christianity) was viewed the last and most evolved stage. ATRs were widely and historically regarded as irrational products of an uncivilized culture.

Furthermore, due to colonialism and slavery, this particular view of ATRs was imposed onto African communities, along with the introduction of Christianity as the 'civilized' and 'true' form of religion.[5] The effects of this are still visible in African communities. Although a significant number of people in African communities still practice ATRs, either on their own or as some form of syncretism with Christianity or Islam,[6] the majority still view Christianity and Islam as 'valid' religions while viewing ATRs as primitive, witchcraft, or religion for the uneducated.[7] In the conclusion to this thesis, I frame this view of ATRs as one of monstrosity, with 'monstrous' being defined as something evil, inhuman, or abnormal. The view of ATRs as 'other 'and primitive,

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[3] Jacob Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.xix

[4] Edward B. Tylor, 'The Philosophy of Religion among the Lower Races of Mankind', *The Journal of the Ethnological Society of London*, 2.4 (1870), 369–81

[5] Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, p.106

[6] For this thesis, I have decided to focus on Christianity because it is the most interconnected with the history of ATRs, given the colonial encounter and the contribution of Christian missionaries to the first accounts of ATRs in the academic study of religion.

[7] David T. Adamo, 'Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s): The Postcolonial Round of Engagement', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 32.1 (2011), pp. 6-7

paired with the perception of them as witchcraft, which entails some form of evil, certainly creates an image of these religious traditions as monstrous in African communities.[8]

The current state of ATRs in the academic study of religion is a reflection and continuation of the colonial legacy mentioned above. The majority of Religious Studies departments, World Religions courses and Religious Studies textbooks contain little to no consideration of ATRs, and certainly no adequate study of the complex and interesting religious dimensions that exist within them. From personal experience, having taken Religious Studies courses at high school and university level in Uganda, Kenya, England, and now Canada, I have not once come across any significant exploration of ATR in assigned classes or textbooks. If mentioned at all, ATRs will often be referred to as forms of spirituality or culture, rather than religion, which excludes them from the framework of Religious Studies. This tendency to categorize ATRs as culture rather than religion is also indicative of the previously mentioned rush to avoid Eurocentrism that creates its own exclusions. Because the label of 'religion' is perceived as Eurocentric, there is a tendency to avoid it when discussing ATRs for fear of perpetuating the exclusions that Eurocentrism creates.[9] However, avoiding the label of 'religion' denies these religions the opportunity to be recognized and studied as religion, thus creating more exclusions. Nevertheless, recent developments such as the introduction of the 'World Religions' category and the increase of interest in Indigenous Religions are creating a space for ATRs to be more present in Religious Studies discourse. Furthermore, African scholars such as Jacob Olupona and Kwame Gyekye have produced and continue to produce significant literature on ATRs. This literature does the work of distinguishing

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[8] I will explore this in greater depth in the final chapter of this thesis.
[9] Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p.59

ATRs as a clear category of religion, making its absence from Religious Studies discourse more glaring and indefensible.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

The larger aim of this thesis is to look beyond critique to consider what the incorporation of marginalized non-Western ideas into the field of Religious Studies might look like, and what might be gained from deeply considering these under-studied religious dimensions. While critique is necessary, it is crucial to move beyond it to discover what might be possible. Under this larger aim, my focus will be Yoruba Religion of West Africa, and in particular, Yoruba conceptualizations of the Supreme Being and lesser divine[10] beings (known collectively as *Òrìṣà*) and spirits in their understanding of religion. I will look at their conceptualization of three divine beings and explore how these conceptualizations enrich three concepts that appear in Religious Studies discourse: Worship, Gender, and Syncretism. My hypothesis is that our exploration of the concept of the divine as it exists within ATRs will challenge and contribute to a richer understanding of various concepts and debates in Religious Studies discourse, which will have positive results within and beyond academia.

My research will build on the work of past and present ATR scholars to demonstrate how these distinct concepts of the divine, as they are found within the Yoruba traditions, have the potential to contribute, in important ways, to our current understanding of religious life. Within academia,

[10] The term "divine" here refers to the supernatural/sacred beings, gods or spirits that exist within these religious traditions, often referred to as divine beings in ATR literature.

this exploration will provide a concrete example of the ways these previously overlooked ideas can revitalize well-trodden concepts, offer new ways of understanding, and new avenues for research. Beyond academia, these concepts have significant practical implications. For instance, Yoruba divine conceptualizations have played a noticeable role in environmental conservation in West Africa.[11] When divine beings are perceived as inhabiting the earth, the environment naturally possesses a sacred quality. Greater awareness of these ideas might give them the power to effect more widespread environmental change through legal means and general community involvement, which are limited due to the flawed and negative perceptions of ATR. Currently, this environmental implication can be observed among Indigenous groups in Canada, the US, New Zealand, and Australia, whose spirituality is a strong motivation for environmental activism.[12]

Furthermore, and of greater importance to this thesis, a larger presence of these religious traditions within the academic study of religion will contribute to a better understanding of them within African communities, because the idea of ATRs as representative of 'backwardness' or a lack of education is prevalent in these communities. A greater presence in academia has the power to reverse this perception. Rather than being viewed as 'uncivilized' and 'monstrous', ATRs can be more positively and accurately understood, which is beneficial for both the people practicing them, and the people seeking to understand more about them. In the place of prejudice and witch-hunts,

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[11] Although I do not explore the environmental implications in this thesis, as I choose to focus on implications related to African self-understanding, a good exploration of these potential environmental implications can be found here: Roger S. Gottlieb and Jacob Kehinde Olupona, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[12] See: Kathleen Harris, 'Supreme Court Ruling Removes Barrier for Massive Ski Resort on Land First Nation Considers Sacred', *CBC News*, 02 November 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/indigenous-rights-ski-resort-1.4381902> and Eleanor Ainge Roy, 'New Zealand River Granted Same Legal Rights as Human Being', *The Guardian*, 16 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/16/new-zealand-river-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-being>

there can be understanding and co-existence. In addition, for those who practice ATRs, there can be more concrete outcomes such as attaining legal rights that have previously been denied due to a limited view of what counts as 'god' and religion.[13] As a member of an African community, it is the resulting implications on African communities that strikes me as the most crucial.

1.3. Terminology

Before proceeding further, I will clarify my use of specific terminology that will appear frequently throughout this thesis. There are two terms that especially need preliminary clarification: 'religion' and 'ATR'.

1.3.1. Religion

The first term I will discuss is 'religion' because it is a component of 'ATR', and it is also a notoriously difficult concept to navigate. 'Religion', though central to the field of Religious Studies, is problematic to define and has been the subject of debate for centuries. To engage in the entirety of that debate is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is worth examining my reasons for using the term despite its problematic history. Scholars have questioned whether the term 'religion' is truly useful and successful in defining the phenomena which it attempts to define.[14] There is a concern that the term 'religion' is laden with unhelpful connotations that strip the term of its usefulness. 'Religion' is either too specific, born out of a specific context that was biased towards

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[13] Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Regulating Religious Freedom in Africa Religious and Legal Pluralism in Comparative Theoretical Perspective', *Emory International Law Review*, 2, 2011, p.878.
[14] Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

Abrahamic religions, or too vague, used to describe anything and everything so that it loses meaning. Either way, 'religion' becomes more obfuscating than helpful.

Scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, have suggested that we should drop the term 'religion' altogether. Smith suggests that when we talk about 'religion', we are essentially referring to two concepts: "an historical 'cumulative tradition' and the personal faith of men and women."[15] He states that it is these two concepts we should refer to, instead of using terms like 'religion', which contain a "distracting ambiguity"[16] and are "on scrutiny, illegitimate."[17] Smith is correct to state that there is a noticeable ambiguity associated with the term 'religion'. However, the alternative concepts he proposes are laden with assumptions that represent a bias towards specific religious traditions. As Talal Asad notices, Smith is still leaning towards some essential definition of 'religion', which is "dependent on faith that is independent of practical traditions because and to the extent that it is transcendental."[18] The characterization of 'religion' under personal faith ignores the centrality of practice to some religious traditions. Additionally, the requirement of an historical cumulative tradition presents us with issues when studying religious phenomena in cultures based in oral tradition (such as ATRs), that might not have their history recognized in the same way as those with established written traditions.

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[15] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p.194
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Talal Asad, 'Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's "The Meaning and End of Religion"', *History of Religions*, 40.3 (2001), p.220

On noticing this potential bias towards certain traditions, we might think to modify Smith's suggested concepts to make them more inclusive. However, this course of action would eventually cause the concepts to take on the same ambiguity that Smith notices in 'religion'. Therefore, I am inclined to believe that getting rid of the term 'religion' and replacing it with alternative terms, is not an effective solution to the debate surrounding the usefulness of 'religion'. Alternative terms present similar challenges. Timothy Fitzgerald's more recent work offers a stronger critique of the category of 'religion'. In his book *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Fitzgerald states that "religion cannot reasonably be taken to be a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life."[19] This idea is echoed by scholars like Russell McCutcheon who critiques scholars for using the category of 'religion' "as if it still names something distinctive, some authentic, ethereal quality that avoids the much lamented reifications of the noun…"[20] Both these scholars perceive 'religion' as a socially constructed category, which does not point to any phenomenon that exists cross-culturally. Neither does it point to anything separable or distinct from culture. This is not only evident from an etic standpoint, but also from an emic one, as those who we refer to as religious do not always understand or define themselves as religious.[21] Fitzgerald and McCutcheon therefore argue that the category of 'religion' is not useful or meaningful, and Fitzgerald further claims that the academic study of 'religion' does not need to exist.[22]

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[19] Fitzgerald, p.4.
[20] Russell T. McCutcheon, 'The Category "Religion" in Recent Publications: Twenty Years Later', ed. by William T. Cavanaugh and others, *Numen*, 62.1 (2015), p.122
[21] Ibid., p.125
[22] Fitzgerald, p.10

However, even under a social constructionist perspective that acknowledges the entanglement between 'religion' and culture, there is reason to maintain the category of 'religion'. First and foremost, the term itself does not exclusively belong to academia, as scholars such as David Chidester [23] and Jason Ananda Josephson [24] demonstrate in their work. Both Chidester and Josephson, despite being aware of its downfalls, use the term 'religion' to track historical progressions, mediations and inventions that fall within that category. 'Religion' enables them to have a key term to track these progressions in a way that no other term could, because it has been globally used for centuries, and therefore unites the academic, diplomatic, legal and colloquial contexts they examine in their work. Not only that, but the term 'religion' holds current legal and political power, so engaging with the term, even within academia, is unavoidable. Even if it is socially constructed, 'religion' still describes something that exists in our current world and it is a meaningful and useful category for that reason.

Secondly, I would argue that the entanglement of religion and culture is not a persuasive reason to dismiss the category of religion entirely. Although religion and culture cannot be separated, religion can be a distinct phenomenon within culture. As Kevin Schilbrack states, "'distinct' and 'separate' do not mean the same thing, since sometimes two things cannot be separated, but they can still be distinguished." [25] He gives the example of the ability to distinguish between a man's role as a father versus his role as a husband. The two roles are entwined with each other, and

[23] David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).
[24] Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
[25] Kevin Schilbrack, 'The Social Construction of "Religion" and Its Limits: A Critical Reading of Timothy Fitzgerald', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 24 (2012), p.110

inseparable as they relate to the same man, but there are parts of each role that are distinguishable.[26] Similarly, if we view culture as the man in this example, and the different roles of the man as different aspects of culture, we can see that different aspects are distinguishable but inseparable from a culture, such as art, philosophy, gender roles, and 'religion'. These can all be examined as distinguishable aspects, while still acknowledging that they are inseparable from culture. Additionally, it is important to examine them as distinguishable aspects, in addition to examining them within the wider frame of cultural studies, because it allows for a deeper exploration of each aspect that invites insights from similar patterns in other cultures. Especially in the category of religion which is applied cross culturally, it is worthwhile to attend to these cross-cultural patterns. I will explore this further in paragraphs below where I examine whether ATR can be considered 'religion'.

Instead of doing away with the term 'religion', it is more helpful to use the term in a way that is conscious of its potential downfalls and tries to mitigate them. Linda Woodhead, in her article 'Five Concepts of Religion'[27], proposes a method to lessen the "distracting ambiguity"[28] of 'religion' that Smith refers to. In the article, Woodhead begins by expressing distrust in the notion that there can be a single definition of religion and further argues that a single definition is not necessary. She states that scholars of religion can proceed in the same way that other fields that cannot agree on a single definition, like politics or history, have proceeded.[29] I agree with Woodhead on this point. It is unlikely that there can be a single definition of religion, given the

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[26] Ibid.
[27] Linda Woodhead, 'Five Concepts of Religion', *International Review of Sociology*, 21.1 (2011)
[28] Smith, p. 194
[29] Woodhead, p.121

vastness of the phenomena it is applied to. However, the fact that we continue to have Religious Studies departments that consistently speak about religion, even while debating the usefulness of it, is proof that a single, agreed-upon definition of religion is not necessary for the term to have meaning to us. What is necessary, according to Woodhead, is to observe the different concepts of 'religion' that are usually being operated when scholars refer to 'religion'. Woodhead states that scholars should have "some critical awareness of what concept(s) of religion are in play, and…be able to justify their applicability in particular contexts of use."[30] In my view, this is a more appealing strategy for navigating the issues with 'religion'. By employing this strategy, we can notice the convergences and variances in the concepts being operated, so that we are aware of the different concepts that define our use of the word 'religion'.

My use of the term 'religion' in this thesis is intentionally broad and predominantly based on the theory of Lived Religion, developed by Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire. When I use the term 'religion', I am referring to lived religion, which, according to Orsi, includes "the work of social agents/actors themselves as narrators and interpreters (and reinterpreters) of their own experiences and histories…"[31] In other words, what we define as religion is determined by what the relevant religious practitioners define as religion. This theory allows for an exploration of conceptualizations of the divine in religious traditions that do not have strict canonical texts or religious institutions, which typically decide what counts as a 'true' religion. Under lived religion, institutional guidelines are unnecessary because religion is located in the everyday, lived experiences of religious practitioners. Furthermore, since I intend to include syncretic ideas in my

[30] Woodhead, p.122
[31] Robert A. Orsi, 'Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in?', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42.2 (2003), p. 172

analysis, this theory is helpful in including and navigating the complexity contained in Yoruba conceptualizations of the divine. As McGuire states, the focus on lived religion is a way to "grapple with the complexities, apparent inconsistencies, heterogeneity, and untidiness of the range of religious practices that people in any given culture and period find meaningful and useful."[32]

1.3.2. ATR

Although this thesis specifically deals with Yoruba religion, I will occasionally refer to 'ATR' when discussing concepts, patterns and histories shared by a majority of African Traditional Religions. I use the term 'ATR' recognizing that in the numerous diverse forms of ATR, there will certainly be some religions that do not share these similar concepts and patterns. At first glance, my use of the term 'ATR' solicits three questions: 'What do I mean by 'African'?'; What do I mean by 'traditional'?'; and 'What do I mean by 'religion'?' The last question has been answered in the section above but warrants an answer specifically relating to ATRs because some scholars have argued that although we can keep the concept of religion in general, we cannot call African beliefs and practices 'religion'.[33] One of the main reasons for this argument, according to those who share this view, is that there is no separation between what would be called 'religion' and what would be called 'culture' in the African context.[34]

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[32] Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.16
[33] Wiredu, p.59
[34] Jacob K. Olupona, 'The Study of Yoruba Religious Tradition in Historical Perspective', *Numen*, 40.3 (1993), p.241

This idea of the lack of separation between religion and culture is not unfounded, as revealed in my above discussion of Fitzgerald and McCutcheon's criticisms of the category of religion. There is plenty to suggest that culture and religion are intertwined in an African context, and enough to create doubt about the existence of African Traditional 'Religion' as a concept in African cultures. Historically, Africans did not need to make this distinction between religion and culture, which means that there is no designated word for religion in most African languages.[35] Furthermore, in many ATRs, the sacred exists in the same space as the mundane and profane. For example, the *Òrìṣà* essentially exist in the same physical realm as humans, so that there is no clear divide between the 'physical' world and what would be the 'spiritual' world.[36] Observations such as these have led to a flawed deduction that religious beliefs and practices are indistinguishable from other cultural or everyday practices in an African context. In addition to relegating ATRs to cultural studies departments, and excluding them from Religious Studies departments, this misguided conclusion about ATRs has affected their perception in other contexts. For instance, Jewel Amoah's research has shown that in South African courts, ATRs often lose out because they are perceived as culture, rather than religion, where religious rights are stronger than cultural rights.[37]

The above observations on the possible lack of a religion/culture divide should not exclude ATRs from being defined and studied as religions for two reasons. Firstly, although there is no

[35] Jewel Amoah and Tom Bennett, 'The Freedoms of Religion and Culture under the South African Constitution: Do Traditional African Religions Enjoy Equal Treatment?', *Journal of Law and Religion*, 24.1 (2008), p.358

[36] I will discuss this dynamic in greater depth in later paragraphs.

[37] Jewel Amoah, 'Religion vs Culture: Striking the Right Balance in the Context of African Traditional Religions in the New South Africa' in *Traditional African Religions in South African Law*, ed. by Tom Bennett, 1st Edition (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2011), p.37

native word for religion in many African languages, and the 'religious' aspects of life are not fully distinguished from the cultural aspects, there are clear instances of areas or beings regarded as 'special' or 'sacred' in some way. For instance, ritual processes, ceremonies, pilgrimages, and conceptualizations of certain beings and spirits[38] that occur among the Yoruba signify something beyond the mundane. Devotees of certain *Òrìṣà* will have objects, considered sacred, that are said to contain that *Òrìṣà's* power, for instance "a disk-like shining object covered with white cloth"[39] for the *Òrìṣà* Oduduwa's devotees. Furthermore, in some African countries, certain groves and rivers are often respected and not touched, because divine beings and spirits are believed to reside there.[40] These instances represent a conceptualization of something beyond every-day life, and beyond mere 'culture'. They are proof of religious dimensions that distinctly exist within African cultures, and it is these dimensions that we primarily refer to when we discuss ATR.

Secondly, ATRs should be defined and studied as religions because the entwining of religion and culture is not exclusive to ATRs and African cultures. This is evident from the clear differences in character that religions take on in different cultures. African Christianity looks noticeably different from Canadian Christianity, due to the interconnectedness between culture and religion, which inevitably causes culture to influence religion. This clear link between religion and culture does not stop Christianity from being studied under the Religious Studies framework, and neither should it stop ATRs from receiving the same treatment. In addition, even in religions like

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[38] Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (London: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 115-162
[39] Ibid., p.167
[40] Asante Daniel, Boamah, *Akan Indigenous Religio-Cultural Beliefs and Environmental Preservations: The Role of Taboos*, Diss. Master's Thesis, (Canada: Queens University, 2015), pp.42-43

Christianity where the separation between religion and culture might be more noticeable, the entangling of religion and culture still occurs because religious believers do not completely separate other areas of their lives from their religion. Under the lived religion framework that I am using in this thesis, religion happens on the everyday level, so religion cannot be confined to just one place – it exists in every aspect of life.[41] Therefore, the lack of separation between religion and culture is universal, which leads to the conclusion that ATRs should be defined and studied within Religious Studies, and not just confined to African studies. By distinguishing them as religions, ATRs can benefit from religious rights and the power that comes with those rights,[42] which has previously been limited by their confinement under the label of 'culture' alone.

Like 'religion', the term 'traditional' is laden with connotations that have led some scholars to suggest that it should be dropped altogether. In fact, many scholars have opted for the use of AIR instead of ATR, replacing 'traditional' with 'indigenous'.[43] The concern with the term 'traditional' stems from the idea that it connotes something primitive, ancient, or dead. It seems to imply something that does not belong in academic spaces or in our current world, which is obstructive to the academic study of ATRs. As Olufemi Taiwo states, the label of 'traditional' has, in some cases, "served to keep the discourse about African religions from attaining a sophisticated philosophical level."[44] However, in referring to these religions as ATRs, I choose

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[41] McGuire, pp.12-13

[42] Josephson, p.259

[43] David T. Adamo, 'Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s): The Postcolonial Round of Engagement', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 32.1 (2011), p.3

[44] Olufemi Taiwo, 'Orisa: A Prolegomenon to a Philosophy in Yoruba Religion' in Jacob Kẹhinde Olupona and Terry Rey, *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p.85

to use the term 'traditional' because I believe that the negative connotations mentioned above are more connected to the perceptions of the religions themselves, rather than the term 'traditional'. If we take away the term 'traditional', replacing it with 'indigenous' as some have done, it does not take away the historical (and in some spaces current) perception of ATRs as primitive, unsophisticated, and incompatible with the modern world. For instance, in African communities where ATRs are referred to as 'witchcraft', the negative perceptions and connotations continue to exist, absent of the term 'traditional'. By choosing to keep the term 'traditional', I am asserting that the term itself does not have to be negative, and the negative connotations seemingly attached to it have more to do with the historical framing of ATRs. In this thesis, I simply use it in the same way that other scholars use 'indigenous', signifying that these religions originate and are passed down in African communities. I reject the idea that referring to them as traditional means that they are stagnant, primitive, or not worth building an intricate scholarship around.[45]

Finally, my use of 'African' within the term 'ATR' specifically refers to African communities within Africa. I do not use this term in a way that perceives Africa or Africans as one indistinguishable category. I recognize that there is a diversity of beliefs, practices, and cultures within the label of 'African', but simply use the term to highlight shared patterns where appropriate. My use of 'African' does not include religions in African diasporic communities because combining the diversity of religions in the diaspora with the already great diversity of religions within Africa would make the use of a general term like ATR too broad and unhelpful

[45] Kofi Asare Opoku, 'African Traditional Religion: An Enduring Heritage', in Jacob Obafẹmi Kẹhinde Olupọna, and Sulayman S. Nyang, *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, Religion and Society; 32 (New York, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993)

for the purposes of this thesis. However, in discussing 'Yoruba Religion', I include divine

conceptualizations that exist within African diasporic communities when it is clear that their

origin is Yoruba religion, and they were almost certainly carried over to these communities

through process like slavery and globalization. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next

chapter.

1.4. Methodology

Scholarly work on ATR often uses ethnography or phenomenology as its preferred

methodology.[46] These methodologies are favored to avoid the trap of imposing Western concepts

onto ATRs. They attempt to avoid this trap by letting the practitioners of ATR speak for

themselves.[47] Scholars like David Westerlund go as far as to suggest that the ideal research on

ATRs should include "verbatim questions and answers or other kinds of information in the

original language as well as in translation."[48] This method has been successfully demonstrated by

Henry Odera Oruka's seminal book *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate

on African Philosophy*.[49] While these methodologies are crucial in the study of ATR, I using

Textual Analysis as my methodology because it allows me to access the type of research that

Westerlund identifies as imperative, and additionally track the wide range of scholarship which

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[46] Jacob Olupona, 'Major Issues in the Study of African Traditional Religion', in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society,* ed. by Jacob Olupona, (New York: Distributed by Paragon House, International Religious Foundation, 1991), p.29
[47] David Westerlund, '"Insiders" and "Outsiders" in the Study of African Religions: Notes on Some Problems of Theory and Method' in Olupona, *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, p.21
[48] Ibid.
[49] H. Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*, Philosophy of History and Culture, v. 4 (Leiden ; New York: EJBrill, 1990).

has shaped, and is currently shaping, the historical and current understanding of ATRs. Engaging

with this growing scholarship[50] is necessary for the larger aim of this thesis, which is concerned

with altering the perception and encouraging the inclusion of ATRs within and beyond academia.

My thesis is concerned with situating the research that already exists today to achieve this aim.

Additionally, when studying ATRs, it is imperative to conduct some level of Textual Analysis to

catch and track biases that might show up even in the works of scholars who use ethnography

and phenomenology. For instance, the scholars most commonly referenced in the field of ATR,

such as Idowu and Mbiti, often worked from a perspective that viewed religion as

monotheistic.[51] Idowu's definition of religion as "the means by which God's spirit and man's

essential self communicate"[52] envisions a dynamic where the believer or practitioner of a certain

religion must be communicating with what seems to be a single 'God'. It is possible that this

monotheistic bias influenced his portrayal of the Yoruba Supreme Being Olodumare as

extremely important to the Yoruba, opposed to other scholars who state that there is no evidence

for the level of importance Idowu ascribes to Olodumare.[53] Through Textual Analysis, I am able

to recognize where certain conceptualizations originate, as well as understand scholars and their

biases, both of which are vital to moving towards a more accurate understanding of ATRs. As

Tomoko Masuzawa states, our "historiography must always include historical analysis of our

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[50] Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. xxiii-xxiv
[51] Taiwo, Olopuna & Rey, 2008, p.88
[52] E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1966) p.75
[53] Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship,* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), p.88

discourse itself."[54] Textual Analysis fulfils this need to examine the discourse itself, which is necessary for my project which seeks to incorporate ATR concepts into Religious Studies discourse, while also making use of texts that use ethnographic and phenomenological approaches.

1.5. Thesis Outline

In this thesis, I will describe Yoruba conceptualizations of three divine beings: Olodumare, Esu, and Sango, and examine the way they reveal distinct and interesting ways of understanding three concepts: worship, gender, and syncretism, as they relate to religion. Under worship, I will examine how a more diverse and nuanced understanding of worship shows Olodumare to be an object of worship, despite not being worshipped in the same way as the *Òrìṣà*. I will also explore the concept of gender as it relates to the conceptualizations of Yoruba divine beings. Although Olodumare and Esu are conceptualized in Yoruba oral tradition as gender-neutral and androgynous respectively, I will maintain the use of male pronouns because they are conceptualized as male more often among devotees and scholars of Yoruba religion. Nevertheless, I will consider what the conceptualization of these beings might contribute to studies of gender, sex, sexuality, and queerness in relation to religion, and how these conceptualizations might evolve as our ideas of gender develop. I will also explore the ways that Esu and Sango are syncretized in Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean religions and examine Sango's conceptualization under a wide understanding of syncretism. Finally, I will consider the

[54] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p.328

implications of these discussions beyond academia, through the lens of the colonial legacy of

'monstrosity' attached to ATRs.

CHAPTER 2: YORUBA DIVINE CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

This chapter will explore conceptions of three divine beings in the Yoruba pantheon, which exemplify the distinctive nature of understudied ATR divine conceptualizations and reveal new considerations that have the potential to enrich Religious Studies discourse. This chapter is concerned with identifying and describing the divine conceptualizations that exist within Yoruba religion. Deeper examinations of the ideas and questions raised within this chapter will be explored in the next chapter. I will begin by briefly discussing the history of the Yoruba people to provide some background to the subsequent exploration of Yoruba religion. The Yoruba are one of the most studied ethnic groups in Africa,[55] and it is worthwhile to illuminate some aspects of their history. I will then discuss the Supreme Being in Yoruba belief, known as Olodumare, whose conceptualization raises questions about what we mean by 'worship', and insights into what we require of a 'God' and the divine-human relationship. Thereafter, I will examine the conceptions of two lesser divine beings, named Esu and Sango, who are two of the most popular beings in the Yoruba pantheon – both inside and outside West Africa. Their intriguing conceptualization within Yorubaland, and the ability to detect enduring patterns that resisted colonialism and export within those conceptualizations, make them fertile ground to explore the distinctiveness of ATRs.

2.1. Who are the Yoruba?

[55] Olupona, 'The Study of Yoruba Religious Tradition in Historical Perspective', p.241

The Yoruba people are a West African ethno-linguistic group of upwards of 30 million people, the majority of whom are found in South-Western Nigeria.[56] This area of South-Western Nigeria, bordering Benin and Togo, where smaller populations of the Yoruba are also found, is commonly referred to as Yorubaland. Before the colonial period, Yorubaland was divided into independent kingdoms, which has led to debate about the existence of a pre-colonial collective Yoruba identity. The Yoruba historian S.O. Biobaku states that the name 'Yoruba' originally applied to the people in only one of the independent kingdoms – the kingdom of Oyo.[57] According to Biobaku and other historians such as J.D.Y. Peel[58], the use of 'Yoruba' to refer to the entire ethno-linguistic group only came about as recently as the nineteenth century "at the hands of Christian missionaries."[59] In other words, the category of 'Yoruba' as it exists today is a colonial or "missionary invention".[60] Other scholars disagree, claiming that a collective Yoruba identity existed even in the pre-colonial period, and that what is perceived as 'invention' of an identity was "merely its popularization to an outside world".[61] Despite the existence of independent kingdoms, and the absence of reference to all inhabitants of those kingdoms as 'Yoruba', there was always a connection between the people that lived in Yorubaland which allows us to speak about a pre-colonial Yoruba identity. For instance, I. A. Akinjogbin asserts that the kingdom of Ife exercised some control over other kingdoms in Yorubaland, signifying a

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[56] Akíntúnde Akínyemi, Toyin Falola, and Project Muse, *Encyclopedia of the Yoruba*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), p.2
[57] Saburi O. Biobaku, *Sources of Yoruba History*, Oxford Studies in African Affairs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p.1
[58] J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp.1-9
[59] Biobaku, p.1
[60] Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p.278
[61] Akinyemi et al., p.5

political connection between the different kingdoms.[62] Paired with a linguistic connection,[63] and shared cultural and social norms,[64] it is certainly coherent to speak of some sort of collective Yoruba identity, although how clearly defined this identity was is still debated. Any discussion of a pre-colonial Yoruba identity is still somewhat speculative,[65] and we must be careful to avoid the postulation of a static, mythologized, pre-colonial culture that often emerges in the reconstruction of pre-colonial African histories.

Whether or not a collective Yoruba identity existed in the pre-colonial period, it exists today, constructed and popularized by Western-educated Yoruba elite from the late nineteenth century onwards.[66] This Western-educated elite was comprised of liberated slaves, primarily those returning from Sierra Leone, who returned to Yorubaland after the abolition of the slave trade in the nineteenth century.[67] These liberated slaves emphasized the Yoruba identity in order to "accommodate Western civilization without rejecting the past of [their] own people."[68] During this time, it was clear that Western powers would continue to be the dominant global powers, which meant that Africans had to embrace the systems that these colonial powers had put into place. To embrace these systems, and simultaneously fight the discrimination within those systems, the Yoruba elite needed to construct a strong Yoruba identity. This identity was formed around a number of things including a shared ancestor (Oduduwa), the city of Ile-Ife as the cradle of their people, shared political and social organization, religions, cultural customs, and a

[62] I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp.14-17
[63] Akinyemi et al., p.2
[64] Ibid., p.5
[65] P.C. Lloyd, 'Political and Social Structure', in Biobaku, p. 223
[66] Akinyemi et al., p.5
[67] Ibid., p.4
[68] Ibid., p.5

host of other similarities.[69] Today, the term 'Yoruba' refers to a distinct people, the language

spoken by the people, and in this thesis is also being used to define the traditional religion

associated with the people.

This Yoruba identity extends partly, but not entirely, to the Yoruba diaspora, which is vast due to

the fact that the Yoruba were among the Central and West African groups tragically taken as

slaves to the Americas. These Yoruba slaves took with them a rich culture and history, parts of

which were retained and reconstructed as needed through forms of syncretism. Therefore, despite

clear instances of a retained Yoruba identity, this category of the Yoruba diaspora has

constructed their own distinct identities in Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, the USA,

and other countries. Nevertheless, with the increasing processes of globalization, these identities

are always aware of and in conversation with each other,[70] allowing us to track them as parts of a

global Yoruba identity.[71] For this thesis, I am including what seem to be diasporic retentions of

religious traditions from Yorubaland as part of my discussion of Yoruba religion, embracing the

similarities that exist in this global 'Yoruba religious culture'.[72] Despite a focus on similarities to

make shared religious conceptualizations visible, the discussion of Yoruba religion in this thesis

is aware of the differences that exist not only in the diaspora, but also among the Yoruba in West

Africa. Yoruba religion, like any religion, is not static. There are ever-changing religious

practices and conceptualizations of divine beings, based on differences in time, location, and

local and global trends.

[69] Aribidesi Adisa Usman, *The Yoruba Frontier: A Regional History of Community Formation, Experience, and Changes in West Africa* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2012), p.24
[70] Christopher A. Waterman, '"Our Tradition Is a Very Modern Tradition": Popular Music and the Construction of Pan-Yoruba Identity', *Ethnomusicology*, 34.3 (1990), 367–379
[71] Olupona & Rey, p.4
[72] Ibid.

2.2. Olodumare

As mentioned previously, the Yoruba Supreme Being is known as *Olodumare*. According to Jacob Olupona, a distinguished scholar of Yoruba Religion and ATR more generally, "The Supreme Being remains the most significant superhuman entity in African religions."[73] This is echoed by other prominent scholars in the field of ATR, such as E. Bolaji Idowu[74] and John S. Mbiti,[75] suggesting that any exploration of divine conceptualization should include the Supreme Being. Therefore, our exploration of Yoruba divine conceptualization will begin with Olodumare. Throughout this thesis, I refer to Olodumare using masculine pronouns as many other scholars of Yoruba religion have done. Whether this is an accurate reflection is a debate among scholars that needs to be explored, and I do so briefly in paragraphs below, as well as more deeply in the next chapter. Olodumare is occasionally referred to by other names that are indicative of his various roles, such as *Olorun*, which translates to 'Sky God', or 'Owner of the Sky'.[76] He is viewed as the architect of the world who knows the fate of all, and on whom all fate is dependent. According to Yoruba myths, before a person is born, they kneel before Olodumare who determines their portion in life.[77]

[73] Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction,* p.22
[74] E. Bọlaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London, Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1973), p.135
[75] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), p.29
[76] Olupona., *A Very Short Introduction*, p.27
[77] Oladele Abiodun Balogun, 'The Concepts of Ori and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 16.1 (2007), p.122

The choice of his conceptualization as 'architect' rather than 'creator' refers to his indirect involvement in creation, similar to Brahma in the Trimurti of Hinduism, who is also best described as an 'architect'. Olodumare tasks the *Òrìṣà* with the creation of the world. It is assumed by Yoruba practitioners that the design of the world comes from him, but he never has any direct hand in the creation of it. Furthermore, Olodumare exists separate from all of creation. Though all other divine beings in the Yoruba pantheon have some connection to earth and are known to occasionally walk the earth as humans do, Olodumare remains separate. He is never portrayed as interacting with humans, and as such, there are very few instances of observable practices or ritual acts directly in reference to Olodumare.[78] This is the reason he is often referred to by scholars of Yoruba religion as an 'absentee god'. The divine beings with whom Olodumare interacts must go up to the heavens to speak to him, but such interactions are considered rare and are mainly portrayed as having happened in a dim and distant past.[79]

The characteristics of Olodumare listed above are universally accepted and uncontested by practitioners and scholars of Yoruba Religion. However, there are a number of other features of Olodumare that are important, but occasionally contested by both groups. In fact, due to the ever-evolving nature of Yoruba Religion and the fact that it has no absolute authorities, these features outnumber those that are unchallenged. The first of these is Olodumare's conceptualization as gendered by many scholars and practitioners of Yoruba religion, including myself in this thesis. This is contested primarily because the Yoruba language uses gender neutral pronouns, much

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[78] As I will discuss, some scholars argue that despite a lack of direct reference to Olodumare, some acts are indirectly in service to Olodumare.
[79] Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World*, Reprint edition (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p.263

like many African languages.80 Nouns can indicate gender in the case of words like father and

mother, but the Yoruba third-person pronouns *ó* (singular, informal) and *wọ̀n* (plural, formal) are

never gendered.81 Neither are the verbs, as is the case in languages like Hindi.82 To give an

example, the Yoruba phrase *'Ó jẹun'* translates to 'he/she/it ate'.83 Therefore, when Olodumare

is discussed in the Yoruba language, there is no immediate indication of gender. However, when

we move the discussion to a gendered language like English, gendering tends to occur

inadvertently. More than that, however, the gendering is encouraged by the presence of

perceived gender roles in accounts of Olodumare. In this thesis, I have used masculine pronouns

to refer to Olodumare. My use of masculine pronouns is simply due to my observation that the

majority of scholarly literature and colloquial discussions about Olodumare use masculine

pronouns or gender Olodumare as male in other ways.84 Under the Lived Religion framework, I

am choosing to adopt the pronouns most commonly used to refer to Olodumare by those who

practice and study the religion. The complexities and implications of this will be explored further

in the next chapter.

Despite the commonality of Olodumare's conceptualization as male, there are instances where

Olodumare is conceptualized as female. Olodumare is often regarded as the parent deity of all

80 Ọlanikẹ Ọla Orie, 'Yoruba Names and Gender Marking', *Anthropological Linguistics*, 44.2 (2002), 115–42.
81 Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (New York : Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan ; Palgrave, 2005), p.107
82 Solomon Oluwọle Oyetade, 'A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Address Forms in Yoruba', *Language in Society*, 24.4 (1995), 515–35
83 Antonia Yetunde Folarin Schleicher, *Colloquial Yoruba: The Complete Course for Beginners* (New York, London: Routledge, 2015), p.19
84 'The Meaning of Eledumare/Olodumare/Eldumare in Yoruba Language', YouTube Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x99MbxB3WsY>

divine beings.[85] While this 'parent' role could be indicative of any gender, the details of how

Olodumare came to be a parent deity hint at femininity. Some accounts in Yoruba oral traditions

state that Olodumare gave birth to the seventeen principle *Òrìṣà*,[86] and others state that

Olodumare gave birth to one deity (Obatala), who then created the rest of the *Òrìṣà*.[87] The

mention of birth indicates the female gender, simply because of the idea of a woman as a child

bearer. Without gendered pronouns in the Yoruba language, assigning feminine characteristics or

perceived female roles conceptualizes a person or being as female, outside of simply stating that

they are female. Suggesting that Olodumare gave birth to the *Òrìṣà*, then, is a legitimate

indicator of what Olodumare's gender might be. In this case, Olodumare is female. In other

accounts, Olodumare is androgynous, containing a combination of masculine and feminine

characteristics. Some Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions, which contain elements of

Yoruba religion, split the conception of the Supreme Being into two beings – Olofin[88] and

Olodumare. Olofin is the "father of heaven and earth", while Olodumare is "the mother of

heaven and earth".[89] Together, they created the *Òrìṣà*. Beyond this androgynous

conceptualization, many scholars and practitioners of Yoruba religion choose to speak of

Olodumare as genderless. This choice is primarily based on the absence of masculine pronouns

to refer to Olodumare in the Yoruba oral tradition, and on the idea that it is inappropriate to

anthropomorphize the Supreme Being, which gendering unavoidably does. [90] Some scholars

[85] William Russell Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria,* Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p.79
[86] Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, p.62
[87] Ibid.
[88] This is another name commonly used to refer to Olodumare, even in West Africa.
[89] Pierre Hurteau, *Male Homosexualities and World Religions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), p.160
[90] Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2005)., p.61

suggest that this impulse to anthropomorphize Olodumare by gendering did not happen before

the arrival of Islam and Christianity in Yorubaland.[91] In other words, some scholars and religious

practitioners hold that the 'original' conceptualization of Olodumare, separate from the influence

of other religions, should be genderless. This range of conceptualizations raises questions about

the relationship between gender and divinity, which will be explored in the next chapter.

The second contested conceptualization of Olodumare revolves around the idea that he is not an

object of worship of practitioners of Yoruba religion. This comes from the observation that he is

not treated in the same way as the *Òrìṣà*. The *Òrìṣà* frequently receive sacrifices and have rituals

and festivals performed in their honor, while Olodumare does not. Furthermore, his absence from

the earth, in contrast to the *Òrìṣà* who are constantly involved in human lives, constructs the

image of an absence of interaction between humans and Olodumare. However, there are

numerous songs, poems, and other such indications of reverence in the Yoruba religion that are

dedicated to Olodumare in the Yoruba literary corpus known as Ifa[92]. They acknowledge his

power, goodness, and ultimate importance. The Ifa passages contain several narratives that

indicate this reverence for Olodumare, for instance: *"Osa Otura says, "What is Truth?" I say*

"What is Truth?" Orunmila says "Truth is the character of Olodumare…""[93] Idowu's book

Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief argues forcefully and persuasively that Olodumare is

worshipped before all other Yoruba divine beings. Although Idowu is critiqued for trying to

[91] Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.140
[92] This is the Yoruba oral tradition that contains poems, stories, proverbs, songs, etc about the Yoruba pantheon and Yoruba religious mythology.
[93] William W. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.xii

mold Yoruba religion into something resembling Christianity,[94] he describes several Yoruba passages, prayers and praise poems dedicated to Olodumare which establish that there is some active reverence towards him. On an understanding of worship as actions that indicate reverence for a being, it would seem that Olodumare is worshipped. Still, scholars commonly assert that Olodumare is not an object of worship among Yoruba religious practitioners. This disconnect is indicative of the lack of clarity around the concept of worship both in the field of ATR and in Religious Studies more generally. In the next chapter, I will examine the different concepts that are implicit when we speak about worship, how they can lead to difficulty in understanding ATRs and other religions that deviate from a Christian understanding of worship, and how we might develop a more appropriate and helpful understanding of worship to support an inclusive World Religions framework.

The final contested conception of Olodumare relates to the conception of ATR Supreme Beings in general. As previously mentioned, some scholars (Olopona, Idowu, Mbiti) believe that the Supreme Being is the most important divine entity in the majority of ATRs, as indicated by the use of the superlative 'Supreme'. Further than that, some, like Idowu, suggest that the existence of the Supreme Being indicates a kind of monotheism for African indigenous religions. He writes: "I do not know of any place in Africa where the ultimacy is not accorded to God. That is why, because this is very true of the Yoruba, I conclude that the religion can only be adequately described as monotheistic."[95] Idowu goes on to clarify his statement in light of the fact that the existence of the *Òrìṣà* necessitate a polytheistic understanding of Yoruba religion. He gets past this necessary polytheism by calling Yoruba religion a "diffused" monotheism where the other

[94] Prothero, p.480
[95] E. Bọlaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Orbis Books, 1973), p.135

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divine beings are simply an extension of the single Supreme Being, just as God is represented by the Trinity in Christianity.[96] He holds that though worship and attention goes to these lesser divine beings, it is ultimately directed at Olodumare, which means that Yoruba religion is ultimately monotheistic. Some scholars, like Osadolor Imasogie,[97] seem to agree with this idea of diffused monotheism because there is some evidence to support it in Yoruba religious mythology. The Yoruba creation story involves Olodumare tasking the *Òrìṣà* with the creation of the world, as if they are his workers or messengers. Olodumare remains conceptualized as the ultimate decider of fate, and consistently receives reports about the affairs of humans and *Òrìṣà* from his divine messenger, the *Òrìṣà* Esu. These details give the appearance of the *Òrìṣà* as extensions of Olodumare, carrying out tasks on earth while he remains in the heavens. If this is the case, the concept of Olodumare as the most important being in a diffused monotheism model might be supported.

However, the majority of ATR scholars suggest that this conception of the Supreme Being as the most important being in a pseudo-monotheistic religion is not supported by any evidence and is in fact the remnant of Christian influence onto ATR. As previously mentioned, the nineteenth century paradigm of unilineal evolution viewed Christianity's monotheism as superior to ATR's polytheism. This bias has informed our views of human religiosity for centuries, and unsurprisingly appears in ATR literature. The idea that Yoruba religion is monotheistic is primarily found in scholarly texts written by ATR scholars prior to the twentieth century, who tried to represent ATR in the image of the 'superior' model of religion, which is Christianity.[98]

[96] E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1966), p.221.
[97] Osadolor Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: University Press PLC, Nigeria, 1986), p.63
[98] Rosalind Shaw, 'The Invention of "African Traditional Religion"', *Religion*, 20.4 (1990), p.345

Idowu is one such scholar. He was an ordained minister in the Methodist Church in Nigeria[99], and this interaction with the Christian tradition may have led him to impose Christian ideas onto Yoruba religion. There is little evidence that Yoruba Religion is monotheistic. Several of the *Òrìṣà*, such as Obatala and Esu are just as prominent, if not more prominent in the lives of practitioners of Yoruba Religion, as Olodumare is. However, this debate can lead us to further explore the concepts of monotheism and polytheism to construct a deeper understanding of the Yoruba pantheon, and the Yoruba understanding of worship and divinity.[100]

2.3. Esu

Esu's two main characteristics are his trickster nature, and his role as the intermediary between humans and divine beings. As intermediary, his official role is as divine messenger, reporting any wrongdoing of both humans and other divine beings and spirits to Olodumare. He is essentially omnipresent, constantly making sure that rituals are performed correctly and consistently, and that no wrong is being done. Artistic depictions or statues of him often portray him as having two faces, looking in opposite directions, to indicate this all-seeing nature. As such, his role is not just one of being a messenger – he is also an enforcer of the laws of ritual and sacrifice. He is called "the policeman of Olodumare."[101] However, his trickster personality is what comes through in popular narratives. He is described as a divine being who likes to scare humans, jump out at them at night, pull elaborate pranks, and even make humans suffer just for

[99] Prothero., p.480
[100] This discussion might be aided by similar ideas related to the claim of monotheism in Hinduism, with Brahman as the ultimate reality and head of this diffused monotheism, despite the observable worship of many different gods and little observable evidence of Brahman as an object of worship.
[101] Ogundipe Ayodele, *Esu Elegbara: Chance, Uncertainly In Yoruba Mythology* (Nigeria, Kwara State University Press, 2018), p.174

his own entertainment. In myths and accounts from believers, he is described as having thrown

dust and clapped his hands, transformed into an animal or a specific person, used medicines or

charms to induce sleep, break locks, become invisible.[102] These tricks make him the popular,

mischievous, and chaotic character that he is in the Yoruba pantheon.

Another characteristic that is agreed on by most, ironically, is the paradoxical nature of Esu's

being. Some go as far as to say he is "the personification of paradox."[103] Depending on the

myths, the circumstances, or who's telling the story, everything about Esu can be different. Due

to the uncertainty about his origins, he is thought to be one of the principal and oldest divine

beings in the Yoruba pantheon. However, some conceptualize him as one of the youngest divine

beings, perhaps due to his playful nature.[104] He is sexually voracious, associated with

promiscuity, virility and fertility.[105] Erotic dreams are regularly attributed to him, and women

devotees request his assistance in becoming pregnant.[106] He is also sexually ambiguous, and has

both feminine and masculine traits. When he appears in the erotic dreams of his devotees, he

may appear as a man or a woman.[107] He is conceptualized as somewhat androgynous,[108] which

calls back to the observation of the relationship between divinity and gender. He is the reason

that order is kept in the realm of ritual practice, but because of his trickster nature, he causes a

significant amount of disorder. He is both the enforcer and the offender. He can be large, small,

[102] Allison Sellers & Joel E. Tishken in 'The Place of Esu in the Yoruba Pantheon' in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Èsù: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, Carolina Academic Press African World Series (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2013), p.41
[103] Ibid., p.42
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ayodele., pp.89-92
[106] Sellers & Tishken, Falola, p.43
[107] Ibid.
[108] Aiyejina, Funso. *Esu Elegbara: A Source of an Alter/native Theory of African Literature and Criticism*, (St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: The University of the West Indies, 2009), p.1

visible, invisible, right, wrong, and numerous other paradoxical characteristics.[109] One might

wonder whether this is also an aspect contained in many conceptions of the divine, despite it

being extreme on the part of Esu. The Christian God is omnipotent and benevolent, but so much

of the problem of evil and suffering suggests that he might be the opposite.[110] Although Christian

theodicies reconcile this paradox with explanations of free will and choice, the paradox still

remains. In Esu's case, the Yoruba do not try to explain it away. He is simultaneously all things,

because that is what his actions suggest. This might also be relevant to the discussion of divinity

and androgyny – two opposite, and even paradoxical, things existing as one thing.

In Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions inspired by Yoruba religion, Esu is also present.

Sellers and Tishken write that "Esu has a universal quality and portability not afforded many

religious figures."[111] This universality comes from the unique mix of his characteristics and roles

in the Yoruba pantheon. As mediator between the divine beings and humans, as well as divine

messenger which gives him ties to the divination process, he plays an important role for all

within the Yoruba religious tradition. Paired with the fact that he is a divine being that causes

disorder, chaos and disruption when he is angered, he demands to be worshipped and

acknowledged by all. Not only that, but his paradoxical nature allows him to be re-shaped and re-

conceptualized very easily in different settings. Esu can be whoever one wants him to be,

depending on the parts of his character one chooses to focus on. Practitioners of Yoruba religion

do not assume that they can control him, but because he contains multitudes, practitioners can

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[109] Sellers & Tishken, Falola., p.42
[110] 'Bible Gateway: A Searchable Online Bible in over 150 Versions and 50 Languages.'
<https://www.biblegateway.com/>, Exodus 7:3-4, Isaiah 45:7, Job 42:11
[111] Sellers & Tishken, Falola., p.50

decide which facet of his personality they want to engage with.112 It is this multifaceted nature

that also allows Esu to be syncretized into other West African, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-

Brazilian religions. Let us look at who Esu becomes when translated into two different religions

– Fon Traditional Religion and Haitian Vodou. I define Esu as the same being in both these

instances because of the fact that processes of slavery in the case of Haiti and simple proximity

in the case of Dahomey led to a borrowing of mythologies and pantheons to form syncretic

religions.113 Although there are differences in conceptualization, the continuity of characteristics,

names and ritual practices point to a foundation in the same being.

Among the Fon of Benin Republic, Esu is named Legba. Among the Yoruba, Esu is also known

as Elegba or Elegbara,114 which explains why this syncretic Esu is known as Legba. Legba is

also a trickster, divine messenger, involved in divination, and prominent in the pantheon. He is

the son of the Fon androgynous Supreme Being, named Mawu-Lisa. He essentially reports all

human and divine activity to his mother. He acts as divine linguist, which means that he has to

translate different languages to humans, divine beings, and the Supreme Being. Mawu-Lisa gave

every divine being a different language, gave the humans a separate language, and gave only

Legba the gift of understanding all the languages. To reach Mawu-Lisa, each being has to go first

through Legba, because he is the only one that understands all languages.115 Among the Fon, Esu

is also more sexually voracious than his Yoruba counterpart,116 adopting a more masculine and

112 'Esu (Ifa Worship)', Youtube Video, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu1EGV_3up8>
113 Donald Cosentino, 'Who Is That Fellow in the Many-Colored Cap? Transformations of Eshu in Old
and New World Mythologies', *Journal of American Folklore*, 100 (1987), p.261.
114 Olupona & Rey, p.171
115 Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*,
Hermeneutics, Studies in the History of Religions ; 8 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980),
pp.71-72
116 Cosentino, p.263

less androgynous conceptualization. Nevertheless, his conceptualization remains incredibly similar. This similarity could be attributed to the geographic proximity of the Fon to the Yoruba people.[117]

Among Haitians who practice Vodou, however, Esu is differently conceived. He is known as Papa Legba, taking the name Legba from the Fon people of Dahomey. Papa Legba is portrayed as incredibly aged and tired, like a "dwindling flame" about to flicker out.[118] He still has a gatekeeper role between heaven and earth, but he is best described as a doorman as opposed to a divine mediator or messenger. His conceptualization as aged, which is drastically different from the powerful, mischievous and youthful Esu, has an interesting explanation. Papa Legba is Esu at the end of the arc of his life. He has been aged after the taxing journey from his home in Yorubaland to the Americas.[119] Watching his followers go through the difficult journey that included slavery and hardship has taken its toll on him so much so that he has grown old and tired. He got his energy from his homeland, and having left it, he loses a bit of strength each day. Soon he is expected to die out.[120] This is tragic and reflects an intriguing anthropocentric conceptualization of a divine being; as with humans, conditions have taken their toll on Papa Legba. There is something striking, too, about the idea of him suffering along with his followers, and the fact that it is implicitly portrayed as a choice on his part – to move and suffer along with his followers. As Christian elements exist in Haitian Vodou, it is worth noticing the parallels with Jesus' suffering and death for the sins of humankind. Papa Legba's conceptualization suggests that the *Òrìṣà* can be anthropomorphized not only in their characteristics, but also in

[117] Sellers & Tishken, Falola., pp.50-51
[118] Sellers & Tishken, Falola., p.52
[119] Cosentino., p.267
[120] Ibid.

their mortality, which raises questions about the delicate balance between anthropomorphic divinity and humanity.

When discussing the perceptions of Esu, it is vital to mention his characterization as the devil in Christian and Muslim belief among the Yoruba people, which has seeped into conceptualizations of him even in traditional Yoruba belief. The conceptualization of Esu as the devil has its roots in colonial-period Christian evangelism to the Yoruba. Missionaries were attempting to preach Christianity to the Yoruba, and one effective tactic was to use concepts the Yoruba already had. Esu's disruptive character, and association with lust and sex[121] caused him to be labelled as the devil by Christian missionaries. This label remains today among Yoruba Christians.[122] This specific conceptualization as the 'devil' is founded in Christian ideas of the devil; there is no equivalent concept of an entirely evil being in Yoruba religion. However, there is a conception of Esu as evil within Yoruba traditional belief. Danoye Oguntola-Laguda's chapter 'Esu: Determinism, and Evil in Yoruba Religion' gives a thorough breakdown of the debates surrounding Esu's relationship to evil.[123] Some scholars, such as Laguda, suggest that Esu is unquestionably a benevolent deity who has been misunderstood and misrepresented. Others, such as Wande Abimbola, suggest that he is both good and evil and constantly straddles those two poles of morality.[124] Others, still, insist that he is ultimately evil (although not entirely evil).[125]

[121] Sellers & Tishken, Falola., p.52
[122] William Russell Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria,* Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p.79
[123] Danoye Oguntola-Laguda, 'Esu: Determinism, and Evil in Yoruba Religion' in Falola., pp.91-94
[124] 'Wande Abimbọla, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976).
[125] P. Adelumo Dopamu, *Èṣù: The Invisible Foe of Man : A Comparative Study of Satan in Christianity, Islam and Yoruba Religion* (Nigeria: Shebiotimo Publications, 1986).

The accusation of Esu being evil comes from the fact that, to some, he seems to create chaos and disorder for no other purpose than his own amusement, selfishness or malevolence. It may seem that he provokes fights and creates disharmony, so that the humans involved have no choice but to give him sacrifices in order to restore order again.[126] Humans worship him for fear of his anger or vengeance, instead of any good characteristics that he may have. Devotees use phrases such as "Esu, do not deceive and harm me; deceive another"[127] because they are cognizant of his malevolent nature. Though this may be a part of Esu's character, it is not all of it. Many insist that Esu's tricks and creation of chaos are merely a tool to help humans reveal hidden issues, be better people and find their ultimate destiny.[128] One Yoruba story depicts Esu tricking two friends, who presumed they had a good relationship, by painting his hat two different colors and walking past them. Each of the friends sees a different color, and they begin to have a heated argument about what color the hat was. While this might seem like an unwarranted trick, Esu devotees say that these are problems below the surface that Esu helps to reveal.[129] Once their issues are revealed, humans are then able to do what they need to do to resolve them, instead of continuing to ignore them. This noble aspect of Esu's character suggests that he cannot be completely evil. Furthermore, Esu is not the only divine being that has a questionable morality. As Idowu states, "…what element of 'evil' there is in *Esu* can be found also to some degree in most of the other divinities."[130] His trickster qualities appear to border on malicious or selfish at times, but that is a superficial and narrow reading, and to call him evil is to oversimplify and

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[126] Sellers & Tishken, Falola., pp.47-48
[127] John Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba: The Yoruba Trickster God', *African Arts*, 9.1 (1975), p.26
[128] Pelton., p.117
[129] Ibid.
[130] E. Bolajii Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief,* p.82

misrepresent his character. Aa an Esu devotee states, "He does not deceive those who worship him. The person who is a servant and worshipper will not be deceived."[131] There is a feeling of protectiveness Esu has over his followers. Devotees also sing joyfully about Esu during festivals and describe his love of dancing.[132] Female devotees speaking of Esu as their husband.[133] There is a clear sense that Esu cannot be purely conceptualized as an evil being.

2.4. Sango

Sango is conceptualized as a warrior. He is strong, fierce, brave, and hyper-masculine. He is the god of thunder, lightning and fire. Sango is associated with the color red and is annually celebrated in festivals held by practitioners of Yoruba religion and the Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean religions that include him in their pantheon.[134] Sango's devotees agree that he values truthfulness, fairness and justice above all.[135] Therefore, although he is conceptualized as dangerous and angry, his wrath is targeted toward those who do not uphold those virtues. Sango's enactment of justice is seen in the role of Sango priests, who are diviners that serve and channel Sango. Devotees of Sango visit the priests when all methods have failed to locate or punish a criminal, most often a thief. Sango priests are believed to have the power to immediately find criminals by directing lighting to find and strike them.[136]

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[131] Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', p.26
[132] Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba' p.23
[133] Ibid.
[134] Joel E. Tishken, Toyin Falola, and Akíntúndé Akínyẹmí, 'Introduction' in, *Ṣàngó in Africa and the African Diaspora*, Joel E. Tishken, Toyin Falola, and Akíntúndé Akínyẹmí, (eds.)African Expressive Cultures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), p.3
[135] Akíntúndé Akínyẹmí, 'The Place of Sango in the Yoruba Pantheon', in *Ṣàngó in Africa and the African Diaspora,* Tishken et al., p.39
[136] Ibid., p.40

Sango's conceptualization is particularly interesting because it is born out of the merging or syncretism of two beings. The first being is known as the primordial Sango. This Sango is one of the seventeen principal or original *Òrìṣà*, who existed before the other hundreds of *Òrìṣà* according to Yoruba religious mythology.[137] This primordial Sango is also known by the name Jakuta, which translates to "one who fights with stones."[138] In coherence with his name, the primordial Sango was known to throw thunderstones down to earth to enact his wrath on anyone who offended him.[139] This primordial Sango was therefore conceptualized as an angry, dangerous divine being whose wrath humans would not want to evoke. The second being contained in the current conceptualization of Sango is the historical Sango. The historical Sango was a Yoruba man who served as the fourth Emperor of the Yoruba Oyo Kingdom, before becoming deified.[140] The reasons for his deification are unclear. Some accounts state that even before his deification, he had magical powers and was able to breathe fire.[141] According to these accounts, these abilities represented a special quality within him that made him more disposed to deification.

The historical Sango's deification does not seem to be a result of his good deeds as Emperor of the Oyo kingdom. Some Yoruba practitioners believe that he was a fair and just leader of the Oyo Kingdom, while others believe that he was a mighty, but tyrannical leader.[142] There is no

[137] Tishken, Falola, Akinyemi, 'Introduction' in Tishken et al., p.8
[138] Akinyemi, Tishken et al., p.27
[139] Bascom, William Russell, *Shango in the New World,* (Texas: African and Afro-American Research Institute, 1972), p.4
[140] Tishken, Falola, Akinyemi, 'Introduction' in Tishken et al, p.9
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.

account of saintly qualities that would warrant deification. The story of the historical Sango's deification is as follows. During his rule, Sango got into some trouble that forced him to abdicate as Emperor and flee. The accounts of the trouble that forced him to flee vary. The most common myth states that he felt threatened by two of his generals, attempted to kill them, but one survived and challenged his rule. He abdicated, fled, and hung himself from a tree.[143] After killing himself, he ascended to heaven and was deified. Most devotees of Sango insist that he did not actually kill himself. They state that he faked his own death before his ascension into the heavens. In their worship of him, they will commonly repeat the phrase 'The King did not hang'.[144] This demonstrates a further split in the conceptualization of the historical Sango – the tension between "Sango as a mere defeated historical actor and Sango as a glorious deified hero."[145] Following the historical Sango's deification, it is unclear how he came to be merged with the primordial Sango. Devotees of Sango offer different accounts that explain the merging of the two Sangos, often involving the historical Sango's connection to lightning before or immediately after his death.[146] Some scholars suggest the two Sangos were simply conflated over time due to similarities in temperament and name, while others state that the conflation was a result of misrepresentation by foreign observers and Christian missionaries. Whatever the reason, Sango's conceptualization raises questions about the relationship between humanity, divinity, and syncretism that were previously raised in the discussion of Esu and will be explored further in the next chapter.

2.5. Conclusion

[143] Ibid., p.10
[144] Ibid., p.11
[145] Ibid., p.14
[146] Ibid., pp.9-10

In this chapter, I have provided an introduction to the conceptualizations of three Yoruba divine beings: Olodumare, Esu, and Sango. All three beings have a wide array of conceptualizations among Yoruba religious practitioners, and consequently among scholars of Yoruba religion. Although there were numerous questions raised in the discussion of these divine beings, only a few can be further explored. Olodumare's conceptualization hints at the need to further examine the concept of worship in Yoruba religion, and Religious Studies more generally. If he is absent from the creation of earth and from human life, can he be worshipped in a religion that is so rooted in immanence? If he is worshipped, why and how is he worshipped? How can we distinguish the worship of Olodumare from the worship of the *Òrìṣà*? Olodumare's conceptualization also raises questions about the relationship between divinity and gender. Does gendering occur only in the case of anthropomorphism? Is there a level of androgyny or gender neutrality integral to divinity? Similar are raised by Esu's conceptualization. Finally, both Esu and Sango's conceptualizations pose the question: What can the syncretism within Yoruba religion reveal about our understanding of religion? What are the factors that make syncretism possible and coherent in the understanding of religious practitioners? What is the connection between syncretic and foundational understandings of the divine, and how do we navigate those connections in our study of religions? These questions present the opportunity to deeply study previously understudied concepts and contribute to a richer and more inclusive World Religions framework.

CHAPTER 3: INSIGHTS FROM YORUBA CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE DIVINE

The previous chapter was an introduction to the conceptualizations of three divine beings in the

Yoruba pantheon, intended to lay the foundation for deeper discussions about the insights and

implications that arise out of these conceptualizations. In this chapter, I will explore the

questions raised in the previous chapter by examining the Yoruba understanding of divinity and

religion as it relates to three concepts: Worship, Gender, and Syncretism. The fact that

Olodumare is conceptualized a Supreme Being despite not being an object of worship,

necessitates a revisiting of the ways we think about worship in relation to the divine. The way the

Yoruba engage with the *Òrìṣà*, particularly Esu and Sango, raises a host of considerations about morality, gender, syncretism, and their relationship to the way we think about the divine. In this chapter, I will more deeply explore these questions and considerations to determine how they might enrich our understanding of certain concepts within Religious Studies and illuminate what mainstream Religious Studies discourse might gain from these understudied conceptualizations of the divine.

3.1. The Divine and Worship

3.1.1. What is Worship?

Before exploring the concept of worship as it relates to Yoruba divine beings, it is worthwhile to examine the definitions of worship, explicit or implicit, that exist within the field of Religious Studies. The term 'worship' appears frequently in Religious Studies discourse, but it often appears without definition or further examination. Depending on the context in which it is used, the term 'worship' can refer to various other concepts, such as to follow, love, adore, revere, serve, sing to, believe in, give offerings to, and many more concepts which make it difficult to determine how we should define it. A standard dictionary definition of worship is "the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity."[147] Under this definition, worship can be synonymous with reverence and adoration without any additional definitional requirements. However, most discussions about worship in Religious Studies discourse suggest that there is more to the concept. Biblical definitions of worship substitute the concepts of reverence and

[147] 'Worship | Definition of Worship by Lexico', *Lexico Dictionaries | English* <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/worship>

adoration for love, so that worship becomes "love that is due to God only."[148] Despite

substituting reverence and adoration for love, this definition is similarly based on the idea of

worship as a feeling, or as something emanating from a feeling. Other Christian definitions

follow the same pattern, speaking of worship as "the human response to God's greatness"[149] or

"an expression of satisfaction at having discovered the truth."[150] These definitions offer no

indication of observable phenomena that we can identify as worship. Worship seems to be an

internal experience, based on a feeling that a religious believer has towards a divinity. In contrast

to Christian definitions of worship, the other Abrahamic religions move towards a definition of

worship that is rooted in observable actions of the believer. Texts defining worship in Islam and

Judaism tend to favor definitions of worship as prayer[151] or other utterances of the believer.[152]

Definitions from other religious traditions are even more embedded in action, such as this one

given in a chapter titled 'Hindu Worship Online and Offline': "Puja means worship and it

involves making a number of offerings to a deity."[153] This definition views worship as a

ritualistic observable action, without indicating a foundation in feeling on the part of the

religious practitioner. Worship could potentially exist without feelings of reverence, love or

adoration. This ritual-based definition is common for other polytheistic religions, including

[148] Jason Lepojärvi, 'Worship, Veneration, and Idolatry: Observations from C. S. Lewis', *Religious Studies*, 51.4 (2015), p.543
[149] Jean Holm and John Westerdale Bowker, *Worship*, Themes in Religious Studies (London ; New York: Pinter Publishers ; Distributed in the US and Canada by St Martin's Press, 1994), p.35
[150] Ibid., p.60
[151] Ibid., p.91
[152] Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994).
[153] Heinz Scheifinger, 'Hindu Worship Online and Offline' in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell, (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2013), p.121

Yoruba religion, which place emphasis on a ritualistic and reciprocal relationship between humans and divine beings, as opposed to an expression of a particular feeling towards the divine. The disconnect between ritual-based and feeling-based definitions of worship complicates our discussion of the concept of worship. If worship is ritual-based, it may be inadequate for the Christian understanding of worship which involves feelings of love and adoration. If it is feeling-based, then it is inadequate for religions like ATRs where ritual is an important part of worship. We cannot select one definition over the other because both are frequently used in academic and colloquial contexts, but perhaps we can approach the complexity presented here in another way.

In a monograph entitled *The Concept of Worship*, Ninian Smart attempts to navigate the complexities of deciding what should be considered worship. One of the criteria he proposes is that the term 'worship' should be applied to situations where an "alternative rendering does not incorporate any notion of worship as such."[154] In other words, if we can substitute something else for the term 'worship' and have it accurately and adequately define what we mean, then we should not use the term 'worship'. For instance, I do not need to say that I worship my necklace if I can just state that I highly value it. In fact, it would be unnecessary and misleading to do so. However, stating that Christians 'highly value' God does not adequately convey the Christian relationship with God. To adequately convey that relationship, we would have to state that they feel love, reverence and adoration towards him, and perform various acts and utterances to show this feeling towards God. All these concepts could be easily and accurately summarized as 'worship', which makes it coherent to use the term in this context. With this in mind, we can consider whether the concept of worship is coherent in the context of ATR.

[154] Smart, Ninian, *The Concept of Worship* (London, Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1972), p.4

3.1.2. Worship and ATR

Several ATR scholars argue that the concept of worship is incoherent in the context of ATR. Talking about the traditional religion of the Akan of Ghana, whose conceptualizations of the divine bear great similarity to those of the Yoruba, W. E. Abraham argues that because the Akan view humans as being a kind of divine spirit within a human body, and therefore being divine in some way, it is inaccurate to say that they worship their divine beings. He says: "When a man is regarded as partaking of the nature of the object of worship, then the actual degree of his worship must be lower than if he did not. Indeed, if a distinction can be drawn between worship and serving, then the Akans never had a word for worship, only for service."[155] Kwasi Wiredu gives a similar argument, also in relation to the Akan, stating that "the Akan attitude to the beings in question bears closer analogy to secular esteem than to religious worship."[156] Wiredu gives linguistic evidence of this assumption, stating that *Anyamesom*, the Akan word thought to mean 'worship of the Supreme Being *Nyame*', literally translates to 'service of the Supreme Being.' '*Anyame*' refers to the Supreme Being *Nyame*, and '*som*' means 'to serve'.[157]

The 'divine spirit' contained in all humans, which Abraham mentions in relation to the Akan, exists also among the Yoruba. Obatala, the Yoruba divine being responsible for molding humans, molds only the human body. A human being comes to life when *Ase* (sometimes also called *Emi*) is breathed into him or her by *Olodumare*. It is said that all living things, including

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[155] Abraham W.E, *The Mind of Africa* (Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2015), p.46.
[156] Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p.48.
[157] Wiredu, p.46

the *Òrìṣà*, contain *Ase* in them, which may be defined as a divine life force.[158] Since this is a similar concept of a divine spirit contained within human bodies, we can proceed with the assumption that Abraham's conclusion about the Akan applies also to the Yoruba. Abraham suggests that because human beings contain some divinity, and consequently are a kind of divine being themselves, they cannot be said to revere or adore other divine beings. For Abraham, the contrast between divinity and a lack of divinity is what defines the concept of worship.

In *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity*, Kimberley C. Patton navigates the relationship between divinity and worship in the context of the Greek gods who "appeared to be themselves worshippers at a sacrifice, performing their own procession."[159] She asks, acknowledging Abraham and Wiredu's assumptions about how worship should be defined: "If worship is by definition an activity dedicated to some power greater than one's own being, how can gods worship the way mortals do?"[160] This initial question alone answers the paradox of Yoruba religious practitioners worshipping the *Òrìṣà* and Olodumare. The divine beings in the Yoruba pantheon undoubtedly have greater power than humans do, which makes it coherent to speak of worship. Humans do not have the power to control destiny, protect themselves from various spiritual forces, heal themselves from certain illnesses, or live a quasi-material existence that allows them to disappear at will. Although they do partake in divinity as Abraham notes, this divine spirit is bestowed to them by Olodumare, and does not give them the same level of power as the *Òrìṣà* or Olodumare. Therefore, humans can worship these divine beings for the things

[158] Rowland Abiodun, 'Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics: The Concept of Ase', *African Arts*, 27.3 (1994), p.72
[159] Patton, Kimberley C., *Religion of the Gods Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.3
[160] Ibid., p.163

they can do that humans cannot. However, even if we were to argue that their divinity still problematizes the concept of worship in the Yoruba context, Patton states that gods can unparadoxically perform acts of worship because "they are the source of, and reason for, all worship". Just as Jesus prays to God, or the *Òrìṣà* perform creation tasks ordered by Olodumare, forms of worship are modelled by divinities in a way that does not negate their divinity. If anything, it asserts their divinity even further. Therefore, there is no strong reason to eliminate the use of the term worship in the Yoruba context.

Nevertheless, it is possible that an alternative term might be more appropriate for the Yoruba context. Wiredu's linguistic observation about the translation of '*som*' as 'service' does lead us to consider whether we should speak of 'service' instead of 'worship', in order to match the African languages that these traditions are born out of and avoid assumptions that might come from a Christian conception of the word. 'Service' is more representative of the ritualistic worship of the *Òrìṣà* in Yoruba religion. This might be a change in vocabulary that would provide more clarity to the discussion of worship in other religious traditions that have a similar linguistic or conceptual pattern. However, this should not completely eliminate the continued use of a more inclusive concept of worship. Although the Christian and Yoruba ideas of worship look different, they still share similarities such as worshipping with prayers and songs to their respective divine beings. Retaining an inclusive definition of worship allows them to be in conversation with each other under the World Religions framework. The concept of worship includes, but is not limited to, reverence, ritual practice, prayer, love, service, religious songs, and religious festivals. Furthermore, as I will discuss below, the concept of worship, as opposed to service, might still be necessary when discussing *Olodumare*. In this chapter, I will use the

vocabulary of 'service' and 'worship' interchangeably to retain the connection between the two concepts.

3.1.3. Is Olodumare an object of worship?

Having explored the concept of worship, and its relation to the Yoruba context, we can now question whether *Olodumare* can be considered an object of worship. The first step to navigating this question is recognizing that Olodumare is not served in the same way that the *Òrìṣà* are. Firstly, Esu and Sango have specific priests and priestesses that represent them, and have a following from large groups of people. Olodumare does not seem to have the same observable following and representation. People sacrifice and pray directly to Esu, Sango and other *Òrìṣà*, but no sacrifices are ever made directly to Olodumare. Some *Òrìṣà*, such as Sango and Obatala, have festivals dedicated to them but no festivals are carried out in honor of Olodumare. Idowu, in *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, states: "It is to be regretted…that the direct ritualistic worship of Olodumare as a regular thing is dying out in Yorubaland. In some parts, it is no longer known..."[161] The number of *Ifa* passages and praise poems that are dedicated to Esu and Sango far outweigh those dedicated to Olodumare. There seems to be a disproportionate amount of service that goes towards the *Òrìṣà*, compared to that which goes to Olodumare. Does this mean he is not worshipped at all? Is he largely ignored by those who practice Yoruba religion?

We cannot conclude that this is the case, because the lack of direct service to Olodumare could be explained by the way he exists in the Yoruba cosmos, and his common conception as the

[161] Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief,* p.143.

'absentee god'. Unlike the *Òrìṣà*, Olodumare remains separate from the world. His abode is in the heavens, where he does not interact with humans or *Òrìṣà*. Olodumare's role in Yoruba Religion, apart from being involved in the creation of all things, is being the God of Destiny. The destiny and fate of all is ultimately determined by him, which assumes that he is in the background of all life, worship and sacrifice. This conceptualization of Olodumare suggests that there must be service to him, but is there enough evidence to support this logical conclusion? Is there an actual phenomenon of service towards Olodumare or do we wrongfully assume that since he is the Supreme Being, there must be service towards him? In other words, by saying that 'there is service to Olodumare in Yoruba Religion', are we saying something categorically distinct from 'Olodumare is conceptualized as the Yoruba Supreme Being', or do the two assertions convey the same thing because there is no observable evidence to support the former assertion?

The answer to these questions calls back the previous discussion of the vocabulary of 'worship' and 'service'. The term 'service' requires an observable ritualistic form of worship, such as that given to the *Òrìṣà*. The absence of this form of worship towards Olodumare in a religion where it is the most immediately observable form of worship has led to the conclusion that Olodumare is not an object of worship. However, while we can say that Olodumare is not served by the Yoruba, which is to say that he is not served in the same observable ways that the *Òrìṣà* are, we cannot say that he is not an object of worship at all. There are numerous songs, poems, and other such indications of reverence in the Yoruba religion that are dedicated to Olodumare. They acknowledge his power, goodness, and ultimate importance. This can be observed in passages of the Yoruba Ifa corpus. One passage states:

"Osa Otura says, "What is Truth?"

I say "What is Truth?"

Orunmila says "Truth is the character of Olodumare…""[162]

Another Ifa passage recognizes his immortality, saying: "The Young never hear that Olodumare is dead…The Old never hear that Olodumare is dead." Furthermore, the numerous names given to Olodumare by Yoruba devotees indicate the intimate relationship that humans can have with Olodumare. In the Yoruba oral tradition, these names express reverence and gratefulness towards Olodumare. Some examples are: "*Olusola* (God enriches), *Oluwaremilekun* (God wipes my tears), *Olugbemiga* (God lifts me up), *Olukoya* (God rejects suffering) and *Oluwadamilola* (God enriches me)."[163] These names are uttered by devotees in relevant contexts as a form of worship towards Olodumare.

As E.B. Idowu states, "the objective phenomena in the religion of the Yoruba are the cults of the Orisa"[164] and "it is possible to search through [the Yoruba pantheon] without meeting Olodumare"[165], but this fact is not representative of the status that Olodumare has in the eyes of the Yoruba religious practitioners. The reason he appears absent, according to Idowu, is threefold. First, to explain the lack of visual representations of the service towards Olodumare, Idowu states that there are no shrines, temples, images, or spaces that can adequately represent

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[162] Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, p.xii
[163] Tubi Paul-Kolade, 'An Ethno-Historical Study of Traditional Religion of Okun-Yoruba', *Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences*, 11.2 (2015), p.147
[164] Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, p.141
[165] Ibid.

his being, because he is known by the Yoruba as *Aterere-k'aiye*, which translates to "He who spreads over the whole extent of the earth."[166] Because the conception of him is so vast, there are no observable phenomena that can represent him, which means that the Yoruba do not even try to do so.

Secondly, to explain the scarcity of observable rituals dedicated to Olodumare, Idowu cites the relationships between elders and young people in African societies. Proper 'social etiquette' dictates that you cannot go directly to an elder to ask for anything. [167] A similar dynamic exists in the case of the relationship between a King or Queen and their people, or a President and their people. Ordinary or younger people can rarely get direct access to the elder, and often have to go through appointed people in order to deliver a message. This is why Esu reports back to Olodumare, in his role as divine messenger. Idowu also argues that although sacrifices are made to *Òrìṣà*, these sacrifices ultimately go to Olodumare. Geoffrey Parrinder notices that in the worship of the *Òrìṣà*, devotees occasionally add a concluding phrase "May [Olodumare] accept it"[168] or "May [Olodumare] send a blessing upon it."[169] There is also a sense among Yoruba devotees that Olodumare is in the background and in the center of all religious practice. While talking about Esu, a Yoruba diviner (*Babalawo*), interviewed by John Pemberton, states that he is "a powerful orisha through whom we hear the voice of Olodumare and come to know his will."[170] Esu, and presumably other *Òrìṣà*, function as mediators between humans and Olodumare. Therefore, although Olodumare is not directly served by Yoruba religious

166 Ibid., p.72
167 Ibid., p.141
168 Parrinder, Geoffrey, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), p.21
169 Ibid.
170 Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', p.27

practitioners, it seems that their service of the *Òrìṣà* indirectly serves him. Idowu cites a Yoruba saying to demonstrate this point: "People praise the Babalawo,[171] the Babalawo gives the praise to Ifa,[172] and Ifa gives the praise to Olodumare."[173] The third and final point made by Idowu, is a combination of the previous two, simply stating that Olodumare is a different, superlative kind of divine being. The reason he is not to be found among the observable phenomena is because the *Òrìṣà* represent the observable phenomena in the religion. That is part of their role, but it is not Olodumare's role. Because he is not an *Òrìṣà*, he "is not to be found among them."[174]

The discussion above demonstrates the need to keep the inclusive concept of worship in our discussion of different categories of divine beings within the Yoruba pantheon. While service is a well-fitting concept for the *Òrìṣà*, it is problematic when considering Olodumare and the reverence and indirect service he receives from Yoruba religious practitioners. The concept of worship or service needs to account for the fact that different beings will be served in different ways according to their roles. Because Esu is intimately involved in human life, people present sacrifices to him, and pray:

"Eshu, I honor you because of your power.

Eshu, you are the road maker.

Come with kindness to me and to my family who serve you"[175]

171 A Priest or Diviner in Yoruba Religion.
172 In this case, referring to Orunmila, the *Òrìṣà* associated with the Yoruba divination system.
173 Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, p.52
174 Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, p.141
175 Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', p.70

This type of prayer is not made to Olodumare, but a single phrase asking Olodumare to also accept the prayer might be added, or Olodumare might be silently acknowledged within the mind and attitude of the devotee. If sacrifices are not presented to Olodumare at all, it might be because, as a devotee states, "he does not need anything" [176] from humans. Sacrifices are more important to *Òrìṣà* due to the transactional, reciprocal nature of their relationship to humans, but Olodumare cannot be and does not need to be appeased in the same way that Esu is. To expect that Olodumare and the *Òrìṣà* would all be served similarly is to lay a misplaced assumption upon Yoruba religion. ATR is often characterized as being more physical, intimate and observable, with divine beings that are a part of the practitioners' everyday lives. The assumption that this was the only form of worship present in Yoruba religion led many scholars who studied the Yoruba as early as the nineteenth century[177] to conclude that there is no service towards Olodumare, and the same conclusion has been drawn time and time again by scholars citing these same ethnographers.[178] However, if we maintain an inclusive concept of worship, and include the attitudes, thoughts and actions that Yoruba religious practitioners have towards all the divine beings in the Yoruba pantheon, we are less likely to dismiss the diversity of actions that make up the totality of Yoruba worship. Furthermore, an inclusive concept allows different forms of worship in different religions to be in conversation with each other, which might provide more insight into our general thinking about religion and worship.

3.1.4. Conclusion

[176] Paul-Kolade, p.147
[177] Alfred Burdon Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, Etc. With an Appendix Containing a Comparison of the Tshi, Gã, Eẹe, and Yoruba Languages* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894), p.34.
[178] See Wiredu citing Abraham, Parrinder citing Ellis, Olupona citing Parrinder.

In this chapter I have briefly explored the concept of worship in Religious Studies discourse, in order to determine whether it is a coherent concept in the context of ATR. Although some ATR scholars argue against its coherence in the African context and suggest the use of other terms which more adequately represent the form of worship observed among African religious practitioners, I argued that a more inclusive concept of worship is necessary to illuminate the diverse forms of worship performed by these religious practitioners. If we substituted the concept of service for worship, we might be able to observe *Òrìṣà* worship in the Yoruba context, but we would miss Olodumare's worship, which is less direct and ritualistic. Furthermore, an inclusive concept of worship allows us to derive insights from other religions and how they conceptualize worship. For instance, Kimberley Patton's insights into Greek gods performing worship, and the Sanskrit phrase '*Namaste*' which translates to 'I bow to the divinity in you'[179] allows us to navigate how the Yoruba can be said to worship divinity when they have a divine spirit. Looking at the worship of the *Òrìṣà* in contrast to the worship of the Supreme Being could provide a helpful frame of thinking for the Catholic relationship with God versus the saints they pray to. This conceptual exchange, prompted by Yoruba concepts that have previously been understudied, allows us to continue building a rich, diverse concept of worship within Religious Studies discourse.

3.2. The Divine and Gender

[179] Jenny Kartupelis, 'Spiritual Awareness and Interfaith Relations', *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 7.1, p.75

Feminist theologian Ursula King emphasizes the sculpting power of religion, arguing that it "has not only been the matrix of cultures and civilizations, but it structures reality – all reality including that of gender…"[180] The reverse is also true, as feminist scholarship over the past 30 years has revealed the formative influence of gender on individual and social identity.[181] Given this influence, the conceptualizations of gender in relation to the divine reveal larger insights into our understanding of the divine and religion, and also into our societies and the way we understand our own humanity. The Yoruba present us with an interesting case study of the relationship between gender and religion. As I mentioned earlier, Yoruba third-person pronouns *ó* (singular, informal) and *wọ̀n* (plural, formal) are not gendered.[182] Neither are Yoruba verb endings, as is the case in languages that lack gendered pronouns, like Hindi.[183] Despite this linguistic gender neutrality, gender in Yoruba society seems to function similarly to other societies which are rooted in more heavily gendered languages. Although gender might have been less significant as a marker of superiority or inferiority in pre-colonial Yoruba society as some scholars suggest,[184] most agree that the patterns of gendering, and the existence of sexism and other paradigms that appear on the basis of gender, still occur in Yoruba society today. I will explore why this might be in later paragraphs.

[180] Ursula King, *Religion and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p.4
[181] Cecilia L. Ridgeway, 'Framed Before We Know It: How Gender Shapes Social Relations', *Gender & Society*, 23.2 (2009), 145–60
[182] Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (New York : Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan ; Palgrave, 2005), p.107
[183] Solomon Oluwọle Oyetade, 'A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Address Forms in Yoruba', *Language in Society*, 24.4 (1995), 515–35
[184] Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.xiii

The absence of gendered pronouns also seems to have a minimal effect on the gendering of divine beings. Rather than create new understandings of gender, the absence of gendered pronouns simply encourages more explicit forms of gendering which still conform to traditional notions of gender. In Yoruba oral tradition, divine beings are gendered through explicitly stating that they are female or male, that they possess male or female genitals, or that they have feminine or masculine characteristics or roles. For instance, in Yoruba praise poems directed at divine beings, female deities are referred to as mother, and associated with breasts[185] while male deities are referred to as husband[186] and represented with a phallic imagery.[187] Several divine beings are gendered as male or female in these ways. However, there are instances where the gender neutrality in Yoruba pronouns allows for a gender-neutral or androgynous conceptualization of divine beings. In this section, I will look at the ways Olodumare's gender or lack thereof is conceptualized in Yoruba religion, as well as explore the significance of Esu's androgyny, and what insights these conceptualizations reveal about the divine and gender.[188]

3.2.1. Olodumare and Gender

In this thesis, I have used masculine pronouns to refer to Olodumare despite the gender-neutral pronouns used in the Yoruba language. My use of masculine pronouns is simply due to my

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[185] J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), p.232

[186] Olóyè Aìná Olomo, 'Sango Beyond Male and Female' in Joel E. Tishken, Toyin Falola, and Akíntúndé Akínyẹmí, *Ṣàngó in Africa and the African Diaspora*, African Expressive Cultures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), p.321

[187] Ogundipe, p.91

[188] For a more exhaustive exploration of religion and gender in the Yoruba context, see Sophie B. Oluwole, 'Culture, Gender, and Development Theories in Africa', *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*, 22.1 (1997) and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997).

observation that the majority of scholarly literature[189] and colloquial discussions[190] about

Olodumare, including those involving Yoruba religious practitioners, use masculine pronouns[191]

or refer to Olodumare as male in other ways. For instance, the different names of Olodumare in

Yoruba oral tradition refer to him as father, king, and other nouns that indicate the male

gender.[192] This gendering as male is certainly complex, as I will explore later in this section, but

in this thesis, I choose not to make a judgement about whether this is an accurate representation

of a pre-colonial conceptualization of Olodumare. Under the Lived Religion framework, I am

choosing to adopt the pronouns most commonly used to refer to Olodumare by those who

practice and study the religion today. However, as I examine the question of gender in relation to

Olodumare henceforth, I will refrain from using masculine pronouns in order to maintain clarity.

Several Yoruba scholars state that Yoruba religion avoids strict ideas of gender in relation to

Olodumare. As part of Olodumare's conception as a Supreme Being that is wholly separate from

the world of humans, physical representations of Olodumare are absent, which directly affects

Olodumare's gendering. Since gendering must occur in more explicit forms in the Yoruba

language, physical descriptions offer one way to gender divine beings. Even in other religious

traditions, physical conceptualizations are used to assign gender, such as in the case of Jesus in

the Christian tradition or Krishna in Hinduism. The lack of physicality in Olodumare's

conceptualization removes this possibility. Kola Abimbola states that the lack of Olodumare's

corporeality and gender in all passages of the Ifa literary corpus means that it is better to refer to

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[189] E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1966).
[190] 'The Meaning of Eledumare/Olodumare/Eldumare in Yoruba Language', YouTube Video
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x99MbxB3WsY>
[191] In languages where these pronouns are present.
[192] *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, ed. by F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.410

Olodumare as an 'it', if pronouns must be used. [193] According to this view, because Olodumare is conceptualized as more of an abstract spiritual entity than an anthropomorphic divine being like the *Òrìṣà*, gendering Olodumare is inappropriate. This is echoed by other scholars, including Musa W. Dube who suggests that in many ATRs, not only do African languages avoid assigning a specific gender to deities, but there is also a deliberate choice to avoid "gendered attributes" that would imply gender.[194] In other words, the choice to conceive of the divine as genderless is a deliberate choice.

Nevertheless, this deliberate choice seems to apply well in theory, but not in practice. As I mentioned above, gender is often assigned to Olodumare by scholars and practitioners of Yoruba religion. The rarity of gendered language in Ifa passages regarding Olodumare provides a blank canvas for different individuals or communities within the Yoruba tradition to paint their preferred ideas of gender. As explained by this Yoruba poem, the gender of Olodumare varies in different Yoruba communities:

"Nobody's father has ever seen Èlédùmarè[195]

Is the oracular answer to anyone who asks

If God is male or female

It is said that at Ife God is male,

But at Ado, God is female.

[193] Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2005), p.62
[194] Musa W. Dube, 'Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives on African Religions' in Elias Kifon Bongmba, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Religion (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p.134
[195] A common name used for Olodumare.

In all the Kingdom of Èwi, (the ruler of Add),

Oàdûa[196] is female"[197]

This poem suggests that the differences in Olodumare's gendered conceptualization are influenced by the needs and choices of different communities. A genderless conception allows devotees to project whatever gendered role they need onto Olodumare, and conceptualize a being that is completely separate from the human world.[198] Just as Christian descriptions of God as father help believers understand his nature, speaking of Olodumare as 'father' might be a way to explain a care for devotees despite his remoteness, which mirrors the traditional idea of a Yoruba father who works to support the family or has multiple wives[199] and therefore is not as involved in their children's lives. It is a way to explain the unknown using the known.

The same principle applies to the androgynous conceptualizations of Olodumare in the Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religious myths, which split the conception of the Supreme Being into Olofin and Olodumare, the father and mother of heaven and earth who create the *Òrìṣà* together.[200] Similar myths regarding male and female energies coming together in the process of creation exist in other West African traditional religions. For instance, the Fon of Benin

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[196] A less common name used for Olodumare.
[197] Oluwole, p.101
[198] This pattern of gendering might also give us some insight into the discussion about whether Olodumare is an object of worship. In Hinduism, Brahman is perceived as the transcendent ultimate reality, who is conceptualized as genderless or beyond gender. As in the case of Olodumare, there is little observable evidence of Brahman as an object of worship. This suggests that the lack of anthropomorphism may directly affect the service or devotion given to a divine being. Perhaps devotion requires some form of anthropomorphism, because devotees need to visualize or conceptualize the being to which they are giving their devotion.
[199] J. S. Eades, *The Yoruba Today*, Changing Cultures (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.58
[200] Hurteau, p.160

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Republic, who have adopted some Yoruba divine beings into their own pantheon, believe in the

female Supreme Being Nana Buluku.[201] Her offspring Mawu-Lisa, is conceptualized as an

androgynous divine being (who is sometimes referred to as Supreme too), made up of two twin

parts: Mawu being male, and Lisa being female.[202] Androgyny also appears in other Yoruba

divine conceptualizations. Obatala, the divine being who creates the earth and humans is

considered androgynous by some[203], and so is Esu[204], the trickster divine being who we shall

explore later in this chapter.

Although there are some genderless and androgynous conceptualizations of Olodumare, the

conceptualization of Olodumare as male is the most common in Yoruba literature – particularly

those discussing Yoruba religion in the English language. Even among those who speak of

Olodumare in the Yoruba language and describe themselves as traditional thinkers or sages, the

conception of Olodumare as male is quite prevalent. As Oluwole notes, although there is some

ambiguity in the gendered conception of Olodumare, it "is not to say that if one interviews

Yoruba sages today, most of them will not try to convince the researcher that Olodumare in

traditional thought was generally characterized as male."[205] One of the reasons that this

conceptualization might be so popular is the simple fact of Olodumare's name. Olodumare's

most common names (Olodumare, Olorun, Olofin) all begin with 'Ol', which commonly

[201] Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)., p.22
[202] Babatunde Lawal, 'Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yoruba Art and Culture', *African Arts*, 41.1 (2008), p.27
[203] Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p.149
[204] Funso Aiyejina, *Esu Elegbara: A Source of an Alter/Native Theory of African Literature and Criticism.*, p.1
[205] Sophie B. Oluwole, 'Culture, Gender, and Development Theories in Africa', *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*, 22.1 (1997), p.101

translates to 'ruler of', 'owner of' or 'one who deals in'.[206] Social norms among the Yoruba, both historically and presently, dictate that rulers and owners tend to be male.

The Yoruba system of family inheritance was historically patrilineal, favoring men as inheritors of property.[207] Some Yoruba women did inherit property from their father or spouse only if there were no other patrilineal descendants. [208] Furthermore, although there were cases where women were able to independently buy and own property, these were incredibly rare and often required the help of male family members or a connection to men in positions of power.[209] The same is true in regard to rulers or chiefs in Yoruba society. The vast majority were male, although some women did come to power in different Yoruba kingdoms.[210] Therefore, when speaking of 'ruler' or 'owner', it is difficult to imagine that members of the Yoruba society would not assume that it is a man being spoken of, which would explain the popularity of conceptualizing Olodumare as male.

The above does not define the entirety of gender roles in the precolonial Yoruba society. Although there were several elements of the society that indicated male superiority, Yoruba women historically held important and powerful roles in other areas of society. In the political realm, some Yoruba kingdoms had female founders,[211] all Yoruba kingdoms had a "hierarchy of

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[206] Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, p.33
[207] Elisha Renne, 'Wives, Chiefs, and Weavers: Gender Relations in Bunu Yoruba Society' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1990), p.71
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.
[210] LaRay Denzer, 'Yoruba Women: A Historiographical Study', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 27.1 (1994), pp.7-11
[211] Denzer, p.7

female chiefs",[212] and all male officials' wives often had significant political power. Yoruba

women were also crucial to the economy, due to their participation in trade and market

organization.[213] Even married, they did not only occupy domestic roles, but held significant

financial and political roles. Scholars like Oyeronke Oyewumi go as far as to say that "there

were no women — defined in strictly gendered terms — in [precolonial Yoruba] society."[214]

Oyewumi implies that there was no difference between men and women in this society.

However, this is doubtful, as the rules of inheritance and property ownership indicate a bias

towards the male members of the historical Yoruba society. Even the positions of political and

financial power were always perceived as inferior to the roles men held. Women in power were,

at the end of the day, expected to "acquiesce to the 'superior' wisdom of the men."[215] In

marriage, husbands were perceived as "superior to and financially responsible for their wives."[216]

Today, Yoruba women in West Africa face the same struggles of gender discrimination that are

common in most parts of the world.[217] It is interesting to observe that despite a high level of

gender neutrality in the Yoruba language, this common pattern of gendering still occurs. Rather

than through features of language, it seeps in through societal norms.

The second reason for the common conceptualization of Olodumare as male, which is most

invoked by scholars of Yoruba religion, is the influence of Christianity and Islam on Yoruba

[212] Ibid., p.9
[213] Nathaniel Akinremi Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1970), p.156
[214] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.xiii
[215] Denzer, p.11
[216] Matory, p.109
[217] 'What It Means to Be Female in Nigeria', *BBC News*, 1 July 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-33239356>

society. While introducing Christianity to the Yoruba, early Christian missionaries adopted the name 'Olorun' for the Christian God.[218] Today, Olorun is the name used for the Christian God in the Yoruba Christian Bible.[219] The fact that this name is used to refer to both the Christian God and the traditional Supreme Being, especially in a society where Christianity has only grown in popularity since it was introduced, inevitably impacts the perception of the name. If Olorun is used to refer to the Christian God, who is predominantly conceptualized as male, then a vast majority of Yoruba people will be thinking of the name 'Olorun' as being linked to a male deity. Especially since Yoruba traditional belief has no strict sense of what Olorun/Olodumare's gender should be, the link between maleness and Olorun inevitably prevails. Furthermore, if the name 'Olorun' is linked to maleness, then the conceptualization of the Supreme Being as a whole takes on that connotation.

Olodumare's names, Yoruba social norms, and the influence of Christianity combine to form a common conception of Olodumare as male. Some scholars argue that because the male conceptualization of Olodumare is largely "a product of patriarchal thinking and cultural systems"[220] brought about by 'Western' or Christian influence,[221] it is misrepresentative of the 'actual' conceptualization of Olodumare.[222] I would argue that the opposite is true. Firstly, there is evidence to support a societal structure in precolonial Yoruba society that makes the male

[218] Gary Lynn Comstock, 'The Yoruba and Religious Change', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 10.1 (1979), p.11
[219] Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Michigan, Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), p.10
[220] Tobe Melora Correal, *Finding Soul on the Path of Orisa: A West African Spiritual Tradition* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2012) , p.16
[221] Oyewumi, 'The Translation of Cultures: Engendering Yoruba Language, Orature and World-Sense' in E. Castelli and R. Rodman, *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p.90
[222] Oluwole, p.101

conceptualization of Olodumare plausible and coherent. Secondly, even if this evidence was not available, the influence of cultural systems cannot mean that a conceptualization is inaccurate, because it is precisely the societal and cultural foundation of a conceptualization that makes it accurate and representative. Conceptualization cannot exist without the people, societies, and cultures that form the concept. The majority of Nigerian society, and consequently the majority of Yoruba people today are Christian, which is bound to have an effect on their conceptualization of divine beings. To this, one might still argue that the influence of Christianity on the male conceptualization of Olodumare is inappropriate and misrepresentative of Olodumare's 'true' conceptualization by the Yoruba.[223] However, this argument is in danger of reifying an imagined pre-colonial construct of Yoruba religion that has not been impacted at all by the realities of a changing society. Conceptualization of divine beings does not exist in a vacuum and will inevitably shift and change in response to societal norms and cultural patterns. This fact makes the male conceptualization of Olodumare worth exploring.

Additionally, while historical and current patterns may favor a male conceptualization, there might be current and future societal factors that are supportive of conceiving the Supreme Being as genderless, androgynous, or even female. As feminist ideas are becoming more prevalent, and the global status of women is improving, it would be interesting to observe whether the regularity of the male conceptualization of Olodumare will start to decrease. I would argue that the changes are already occurring. Oluwole's observation, regarding Yoruba sages being eager to conceptualize Olodumare as male despite a genderless conception in Yoruba oral tradition, is a perfect example of how the changing ideas of gender are impacting Yoruba divine

[223] Ibid.

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conceptualization. As a Yoruba woman, engaging with ideas of feminism and interrogating our

thinking about gender, Olowule focuses on the conceptualizations of Olodumare that deviate

from a male understanding. Other Yoruba female scholars like Oyewumi, similarly focus on an

interpretation of Yoruba religion that allows for different understandings of gender roles.[224] The

Yoruba sages, who are more influenced by a historical pattern of gendered thinking, hold on to a

male conceptualization. This development of Olodumare's conceptualization, and the ideas of

gender that are now being highlighted, may have positive and fruitful implications for studies of

gender and sexuality in relation to religion.

3.2.2. The Òrìṣà and Gender

Most *Òrìṣà*, as highly anthropomorphized divine beings, are conceptualized as having a sex and

a gender. Their anthropomorphic nature, and the fact that they walk the same earth that humans

walk, allows for a more visual and immediate understanding of them as gendered beings.

Furthermore, many *Òrìṣà* are portrayed as engaging in and enjoying physical, including sexual

acts,[225] which means that they are conceptualized as having genitalia and biological markers that

allow us to speak of gender and sex in a more literal manner. Several of the *Òrìṣà* are also

portrayed as having been married, having parents, or being parents, which allows the Yoruba to

view them in specific gender roles.[226] Despite the foreground nature of gender in the *Òrìṣà's*

conceptualization, there are still several complex ideas about gender and the divine that arise.

[224] Oyěwùmí., *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender,* p.140
[225] Olu Oguibe, 'Finding a Place: Nigerian Artists in the Contemporary Art World', *Art Journal*, 58.2 (1999), p.36
[226] Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, p.52

Unlike Olodumare who is conceptualized as genderless according to the Ifa corpus, Esu, Olodumare's divine messenger, is conceptualized as androgynous. Similar to my use of male pronouns when discussing Olodumare, I have used male pronouns in discussing Esu because they are most commonly used by scholars and practitioners of Yoruba religion. His physical or visual representations by devotees portray him as having either gender, or both genders.[227] He is known to appear in the dreams of his followers as either a man or woman, depending on what they need him to do for them.[228] Esu's androgyny is in congruence with his paradoxical nature, and other features of his representation that evidence this fact, such as his depiction with two faces.[229] In all areas of his conceptualization, he cannot be boxed into any one idea. Esu's portrayal can be very physical, and representations of him occasionally include the unashamed portrayal of him having genitalia – male images as having a penis, and female images as having a vagina or extended breasts.[230] Even in physical representations, his androgyny remains evident. Nevertheless, the same phenomenon that occurs with Olodumare occurs with Esu, where the most common conceptualization of him is male. He is definitely androgynous in theory, but observable evidence demonstrates the predominance of a male conceptualization.[231] His followers often use the male pronoun 'he' when speaking about him in English,[232] and most statues and images of him include a visible beard on his face,[233] signifying a male representation.

[227] Toyin Falola, 'Esu: The God Without Boundaries' in *Èsù: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, ed. Toyin Falola, Carolina Academic Press African World Series (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2013), p.5
[228] Allison Sellers & Joel E. Tishken in 'The Place of Esu in the Yoruba Pantheon' in Falola, *Èsù: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, p.43
[229] Babatunde Lawal, 'Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art', *The Art Bulletin*, 83.3 (2001), p.502
[230] Michael O. Afolayan, 'The Penis, The Pen, and The Praise: Esu the Seminal Force in African American Life' in Falola, *Èsù: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, p.316
[231] This is why I choose to use male pronouns in reference to Esu.
[232] Dele Jegede, 'Esu: Personal Testimonies by a Priest and Religious Leader', in Falola, p.174
[233] See Esu dance staff image in Olúfémi Táíwò, 'Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art', *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 40.1 (2017), p.109

This can be attributed to the same reasons discussed in the conceptualization of Olodumare, namely ties to Christianity and patriarchal ideas in society, as well as a number of other reasons.

Firstly, Esu's androgyny is associated with a strong sense of his sexuality and libidinous energy.[234] Not only are there physical representations of him with a penis, but most representations of him include a large "phallic object such as a club, or hairdressing that is often braided and styled upright in a phallic design."[235] Furthermore, there are myths that describe him as being cursed with an eternally erect penis.[236] As a result of this representation, Esu's female followers often attribute erotic dreams to him, and seek his assistance in matters of fertility or pregnancy.[237] Interestingly, the Yoruba Esu is more associated with erotic energy and there are no myths that portray him engaging in sexual acts with humans. In fact, a Yoruba song praising Esu contains a lyric stating that his "penis broken in two",[238] indicating a disconnect between the heightened erotic energy he represents and his actions. However, his Fon counterpart Legba is portrayed as sexually insatiable, and there are many myths that portray him engaging in sexual acts with humans.[239] Furthermore, it is worth considering that this kind of sexual energy is linked to a male conceptualization, because the same sexual energy is attributed to Sango, who has a definitively masculine conceptualization in the Yoruba pantheon.[240] Sango's link to sexual energy is so strong that he is considered to be "the driving force behind men who are

[234] Sellers & Tishken, Falola, p.43
[235] Ibid.
[236] Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, an Ancient West African Kingdom*, vol.2 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp.205-206
[237] Sellers & Tishken, Falola, p.43
[238] Donald Cosentino, 'Who Is That Fellow in the Many-Colored Cap? Transformations of Eshu in Old and New World Mythologies', *Journal of American Folklore*, 100 (1987), p.264
[239] Ibid.
[240] Olomo, Tishken et al., p.315

womanizers…"[241] Although he does not possess anyone, womanizers are seen to be partaking in the same erotic energy that Esu represents. The link between sexual energy and masculinity here, which might be reflective of similar ideas in Yoruba society, leads to a predominant conceptualization of Esu as male.

The second reason for Esu's conceptualization as male could be the portrayal of his occasionally threatening and violent nature. The ties between danger, violence and masculinity are also evident in Sango's conceptualization. Sango is known as the god of fire, thunder and lightning and is also known as the wrath of Olodumare.[242] Artistic depictions of him show an angry, fierce face, wielding an axe or axe-like weapon. He is said to carry out dangerous magic tricks, breathe fire, and play with fire.[243] Festivals in his honor involve magic tricks in which people insert sharp objects into various body parts, such as the lips and tongue, and burn a number of items in big fires.[244] These actions are performed to create an atmosphere of danger and violence, further linking this threatening nature to ideas of masculinity.[245] Since Esu's conceptualization includes some elements of violence, such as his tricks that turn out to be cruel or dangerous and his punishment of those that do not perform their rituals and sacrifices, he is associated with this masculine conceptualization.

[241] Ibid, p.312
[242] J. Pemberton, 'A Cluster of Sacred Symbols: Orịṣa Worship among the Igbomina Yoruba of Ila-Ọrangun', *History of Religions*, 17.1 (1977), p.6
[243] Akinyemi, Falola, Tishken, in Tishken et al., p.9
[244] O.A. Oderinde, 'The Lore of Religious Festivals among the Yorùbá and its Social Relevance'. *LUMINA,* 22.2 (2011), p.3
[245] Ronke Iyabowale Ako-Nai, *Gender and Power Relations in Nigeria* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p.103

These two reasons, as well as those previously discussed in relation to Olodumare, explain why

Esu is commonly conceptualized as male, despite a theoretical conceptualization as

androgynous. The predominance of a male conceptualization does not nullify Esu's

conceptualization as androgynous because some *Òrìṣà*, such as Orunmila (*Òrìṣà* of wisdom) are

portrayed as having only one gender. The fact that there is a conceptualization of Esu as

androgynous means that it is deliberate. This, in itself, makes it worth exploring because Esu's

androgynous conceptualization provides a place to rethink gender dynamics and strict gender

roles in Yoruba society, and other societies that have adopted Yoruba divine conceptualizations,

opening up the discussion of gender spectrums and queerness in places that it might not naturally

occur. As mentioned previously, although this has not been observed in current and historical

gender roles, these different understandings of gender might make Yoruba religion a place where

traditional ideas of gender and sexuality can be challenged.

3.2.3. Conclusion

The combination of a predominantly oral tradition, the lack of gendered pronouns in the Yoruba

language, and the "marked inconsistency"[246] and complexity of the gendering of divine beings in

the Yoruba pantheon makes Yoruba religion interesting terrain for an exploration of the

conceptualization of gender in relation to the divine. The conceptualization of the divine in

Yoruba religion provides a distinct lens to look at gendered religion. For instance, we might

consider how the change from the Yoruba language to the English language forces certain gender

attributions that might not occur naturally. Alternatively, the change in language may illuminate

[246] Karin Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991)., p.313

patterns of gender attribution that were always there. In adopting the English language, Yoruba religious practitioners, and scholars of Yoruba religion are re-conceptualizing or refining the conceptualization of gender in relation to these divine beings. This process of refining and reshaping Yoruba conceptualizations of divine beings in relation to gender reveals some insights that might contribute to studies of gender, sex, sexuality, and queerness in relation to religion.

3.3. The Divine and Syncretism

Syncretism is a complex term and category within the field of Religious Studies and is generally used to describe the merging that occurs when religions or cultures, viewed as pure or separate entities, encounter each other.[247] For the purposes of this thesis, I am using the term 'syncretism' to describe instances of entanglement and amalgamation that have created Yoruba divine conceptualizations as they exist today. These do not have to be instances that have occurred outside of Yorubaland or outside of West Africa. I will discuss Sango's conceptualization under a wider concept of syncretism, because it follows the same process of a merging of ideas to create a new conceptualization. Although it happened within Yorubaland, the process and result mirror instances of what is traditionally thought of as syncretism. I will discuss this in more detail in paragraphs below.

Syncretism occurs in all religions, societies and cultures, but there are a few factors that make Yoruba religion a particularly interesting site to examine processes of syncretism. Due to its locative nature, and the fact that it is treated as the historical religion of the Yoruba people of

[247] Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion : A Reader* (London, nEW York: Routledge, 2016), pp.2-5

West Africa, it is open to the idea that other peoples and communities can have different, equally valid forms of religion. It makes no efforts to evangelize or proselytize, and it is interesting to consider whether this makes it more or less receptive to syncretism. On one hand, the perception that Yoruba religion belongs to the Yoruba people might make them protective over the religion, resisting syncretism with other religions. On the other hand, the belief that different pantheons can equally coexist in the world might open the door to more forms of syncretism, unlike religions which do not share this openness. The latter is likely true, based on observations of the historical interaction between Yoruba religion and Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, where syncretism is not as welcome by the latter two religions as it is by Yoruba religion.[248] The insular locative nature of Yoruba religion also leads us to consider how people outside of West Africa come to adopt Yoruba religion, and once they have adopted it, how they go about practicing it. Furthermore, how do the anthropomorphized *Òrìṣà*, whose home is Yorubaland, fare in an entirely new location?

The above considerations are important to keep in mind as I explore three specific instances of syncretism that have occurred naturally due to proximity and globalization, and tragically through slavery and colonization. I am going to examine the interesting and complex outcomes of syncretism in these three areas: the representation of Esu in Yoruba Christianity, the adoption of Yoruba divine beings into Afro- Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions, and the syncretism of sorts which makes Sango the divine being he is in the Yoruba pantheon today. These three separate areas reveal how syncretism has played a key part in Yoruba conceptualization of the

[248] J. D. Y. Peel, 'The Pastor and the "Babalawo": The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 60.3 (1990), p.350

divine and are interesting grounds to consider more generally how syncretism affects conceptualizations of the divine.

3.3.1. Syncretism and 'Esu the devil'

First, let us look at the syncretism that arose from Esu's adoption into Christianity and Islam in West Africa. There are several features of Yoruba religion which have been adopted into these two Abrahamic religions as they are practiced by the Yoruba,[249] and Esu is the most interesting and immediately observable example of this. Furthermore, although Esu's adoption into both Abrahamic religions follows a similar trend,[250] I will specifically be discussing this instance of syncretism in relation to Christianity because that is where it is seen most clearly. As previously mentioned, Esu's appearance as the devil or Satan in Yoruba Christianity is due to the system of evangelism adopted by early Christian missionaries. In order to effectively evangelize, these missionaries needed to link Christian concepts to those already existing among the Yoruba, which the Yoruba would better understand. In looking to find an equivalent concept for the Christian God, they found one in Olodumare/Olorun. In looking for an equivalent concept for the devil, they found one in Esu. This conceptualization was further established by translations of the Bible into Yoruba, which had the name 'Esu' translated in place of the devil.[251] Today, the conceptualization of Esu as the devil remains in West Africa, and arguably statistically surpasses different conceptualizations of Esu due to the fact that the majority of people in West Africa are either Christian or Muslim.

[249] Olupona, *A Very Short Introduction*, p.23
[250] Sellers & Tishken, Falola, p.52
[251] Funso Aiyejina, *Esu Elegbara: A Source of an Alter/Native Theory of African Literature and Criticism*, p.4

In itself, this adoption into Christianity does not tell us much about syncretism other than the fact of its existence. However, the reasons behind the choice of labelling Esu as the devil might reveal something noteworthy, especially since the reasons for that choice are not immediately clear. What is clear is that Christian missionaries needed a name for the devil in a culture where there was no equivalent concept, but what is not clear is why Esu was the name eventually chosen. Especially when we consider Esu's role as divine messenger and enforcer of ritual practices, and his closeness to Olodumare, it seems strange that Esu should be labelled as the devil. One idea proposed by scholars is that Esu was the closest fit for the devil due to his trickster nature. His tricks on humans, and the fact that he carried out mischief for his own amusement might have excluded him from appearing to be a benevolent divine being to the missionaries, which would lead them to view him as malevolent. This is the first insight into the functions of syncretism, where isolated details pulled out of the context of a whole being produce a syncretic understanding of a being. To fuel the understanding of Esu as the devil, Christian missionaries were able to ignore the other roles and characteristics of Esu and turn his mischievous nature into malevolence.

Another suggestion behind the choice of Esu as the devil ironically involves his role as the enforcer of ritual practices and general good behavior. Because he is perceived as reporting and punishing any wrongdoing to Olodumare, he is feared by the *Òrìṣà* and human beings alike. This fear, if misunderstood, might be misrepresented as a general attitude of fear towards a malevolent Esu, which would support the characterization of him as the devil. Yet another reason for this representation as the devil could be the fact that he is seen as the youngest of the

primordial *Òrìṣà*, which perhaps denotes a sense of recklessness and pride that might be compared to the pride which led to the fall of Satan in Christian mythology. These are more instances of facets of Esu's character picked apart to support the representation of him as the devil. Esu's conceptualization is so paradoxical and multifaceted that almost all characteristics can be found within him, which made it simple for the Christian missionaries to portray him as the devil. It is also possible that the syncretic understanding of Esu considered a more whole version of Esu's personality than I have acknowledged thus far. All the features of Esu – his paradoxical nature, his closeness to Olodumare, the fact that he occasionally deceives and harms humans even though he does not do so to his followers – do point to a Christian understanding of the devil. Satan is conceptualized as a fallen angel who was once close to God and Esu's deception mirrors that of the serpent in the Christian Bible.[252] Even Esu's tendency to trick people in order to test them mirrors the devil's testing of Jesus in the New Testament.[253] The combination of these similarities between Esu and Satan may have eased the creation of a syncretic understanding of Esu as the devil, which still exists today.

The above might be viewed as a phenomenon entirely separate from syncretism. Although there is an absorption of ideas, it might not be viewed as enough of a merging to warrant the term 'syncretism'. 'Esu the devil' and 'Esu the trickster' might be more accurately defined as a "combination of separate portions that remain identifiable compartments."[254] However, I use the label of syncretism because this conception of Esu as the devil has been adopted back into Yoruba religion. The conceptualization of Esu in Yoruba Christianity has definitely had some

[252] Bible Gateway, Genesis 3:1-20
[253] Bible Gateway, Matthew 4:1-11
[254] Mlenga Joyce, *Dual Religiosity in Northern Malawi: Ngonde Christians and African Traditional Religion* (Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2016), p.11

impact in Yoruba belief in West Africa, as well as the religions in the Caribbean and Brazil, which contain features of Yoruba religion.[255] This impact does not involve conceptualizing him as the devil in the Christian sense, because the characterization of a single purely evil being is very particular to Abrahamic Religions. Rather, the conceptualization simply attributes evil to Esu, in the same way that evil is often attributed to the devil. Not only is Esu viewed as primarily evil (distinctly different from purely evil), but he is viewed as being a common cause of evil within the world, and within human beings. His mischievous and trickster nature has come to be perceived in a darker sense. An Esu devotee states: "[Esu] has power. He deceives and is wicked. Olodumare, who made him, is now doubtful about his creation of [Esu]."[256] Although she goes on to state that Esu is not wicked towards his followers, there is a significant conceptualization of Esu as a Satan-like figure, who is so wicked that Olodumare is questioning his creation of Esu. Whether this is because he has always been primarily evil and consistently incited evil in human beings, or he has been corrupted by the power of his position as divine messenger and become evil over time,[257] some scholars and practitioners of Yoruba religion seem to conceptualize Esu as primarily evil.[258]

This is fascinating because it is evidence that the conceptualization of Esu as evil has taken a turn back into Yoruba religion. This is not only an indication of the fluidity of Esu's conceptualization and Yoruba religion in general, but it also demonstrates the complexities of syncretism. To conceptualize Esu as the devil or 'pure evil' in Yoruba Christianity, details about

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[255] Afolayan, Falola, p.320
[256] Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', p.26
[257] Sellers & Tishken, Falola, p.63
[258] Bewaji, John A. I., 'Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil', *African Studies Quarterly*, 2.1 (1998), p.13

Esu (which when in context do not point to evilness so much as a morally ambiguous nature) were exaggerated and generalized. When the conceptualization of Esu as the devil began to influence traditional Yoruba religion, that influence translated into conceptualizing Esu as primarily evil, rather than the purely evil Christian devil because the concept of a purely evil being is not coherent in the Yoruba religious tradition. This conceptualization of Esu as primarily evil then feeds the conceptualization of Esu as the devil and creates a self-serving cycle. It also makes it impossible to separate the two conceptualizations, as some have tried to do.[259] Although the missionaries' choice to call Esu the devil might have been an attempt to demonize Yoruba religion, a misunderstanding of Esu, or the result of a genuine search for a presence they took to be ontologically real, it was likely not a deliberate attempt at syncretism.[260] Nevertheless, they ultimately achieved a fascinating instance of a syncretic divine conceptualization. The two conceptualizations of Esu (as primarily evil, and as the devil) inform and influence each other, blurring traditional lines of religio-ideological separation. For all intents and purposes, they have become one in the minds of some Yoruba people, as well as some scholars and other practitioners of Yoruba religion. Of course, there are several scholars and practitioners of Yoruba religion that argue against the idea of Esu as primarily evil and try to frame it as a fundamental misunderstanding of Esu. However, their arguments present further proof of the creation of this syncretic understanding of Esu.

3.3.2. Syncretism beyond West Africa

[259] Akinyemi, Falola, Tishken, in Tishken et al., p.7
[260] Lere Adeyemi, 'Countering Misrepresentation of Esu in Fiction', in Falola, p.292

The second instance of syncretism I will explore is related to the adoption of Yoruba divine beings into Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions.[261] Devotees of Yoruba divine beings are found in Mexico, Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad and Tobago, among other places.[262] I will discuss this instance of syncretism in relation to Esu and Sango, who are the most popular divine beings in the Yoruba-influenced pantheons beyond West Africa. The first divine being we shall discuss is Esu. In the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, he is commonly known as Exu. In Haitian Vodou, he is commonly known as Legba, or Papa Legba.[263] In the Afro-Cuban religion Santeria,[264] he is known as Echu or Eleggua.[265] In all these religions, there are a few elements of the Yoruba conceptualization of Esu still present, which allow us to link all these conceptualizations to the same divine being. For instance, in Haiti, Papa Legba, like Esu, is viewed as a kind of mediator between heaven and earth. Although he is better described as a doorman[266] and guardian of crossroads[267] than a divine messenger in the Haitian context, the concept of mediation between two realms is still present. A similar conception exists in Cuba, where Echu is viewed as the *Òrìṣà* who "controls the roads in worship, opens and closes paths, and points to the crossroads."[268] There is still an element of mediation between two realms, retaining a link to the Yoruba conceptualization of Esu. Another consistent thread in these Afro-

[261] Which have also had influence in other parts of Latin America and the United States
[262] Stephen Folaranmi, 'Art in the Service of Sango', in Falola, p.157
[263] Some (e.g. Herskovits) would suggest that the name 'Legba' indicates that this conceptualization of Esu is from the Dahomey, not the Yoruba. However, the name also exists in Yorubaland, so it is difficult to separate the true. I choose to attribute some Yoruba origin to it here.
[264] Some prefer to call the religion 'Lucumi'.
[265] Harry G. Lefever, 'When the Saints Go Riding in: Santeria in Cuba and the United States', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35.3 (1996), p.325
[266] Sellers & Tishken, Falola, p.52
[267] Brian Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.196
[268] Lesley Feracho, 'Arrivals and Farewells: The Dynamics of Cuban Homespace through African Mythology in Two Eleggua Poems by Nancy Morejón', *Hispania*, 83.1 (2000), p.54

Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean religions is his trickster nature.[269] This propensity towards tricks

and mischief has become the most consistent and universal element of Esu's conceptualization,

which is why his descriptions in writings about Yoruba religion will often begin with calling him

a 'trickster deity'. These similar features act as the thread which connects these divine

conceptualizations to the Yoruba conceptualization of Esu.

A Sango-type being is also found in these religions, and the process of his syncretism bears

similarities to that of Esu. In Candomblé of Brazil, he is commonly known as Xango; in Santeria

of Cuba and Vodou of Haiti, he is commonly known as Chango. In these traditions, he is

connected to thunder, lightning and fire. He is also associated with royalty, wrath, power and

danger. In comparison to Esu, Sango has a more consistent transnational conceptualization. More

of his features remain consistent irrespective of the context. Despite the similarities in

conceptualizations, however, there are numerous ways in which both Sango and Esu's

transnational conceptualizations deviate from their original Yoruba forms.

One highly distinctive feature of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian expressions of Esu and

Sango that makes a sharp deviation from their traditional Yoruba forms, is their association with

Catholic saints in some of these religious traditions. In Brazil, Cuba and Haiti, West African

deities and Catholic saints are linked. This phenomenon evolved out of slaves attempting to

reconcile the public practice of the official religion of Catholicism with the continued private

worship of the deities they knew from West Africa.[270] Each West African deity is syncretized

[269] Ibid.
[270] Andrew Apter, 'Herskovits's Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1.3 (1991), p.243

with a Catholic saint counterpart so that public images, prayers and songs do not appear to be anything more than Catholic worship,[271] when in actuality their significance lies in their West African spirituality. Essentially, the worship of the *Òrìṣà* is concealed by linking the *Òrìṣà* with Catholic saints. This is a striking example of a unique syncretic religiosity. In Cuba, Sango is attached to Saint Barbara, while in Brazil he is linked to Saint Jeronimo.[272] In Haiti, Esu is worshipped under the camouflage of Saint Lazarus, Saint Anthony, and Saint Peter.[273] In some traditions, Esu is not associated to any saint because he is viewed as the devil,[274] as a result of Esu's position in Yoruba Christianity discussed previously.

Though the early syncretism may have its origins in the concealment of the worship of Yoruba deities, it is no longer the case. Today, the associations are made explicit. The Yoruba deities and their counterparts are matched due to various connections in their appearance, histories, or mythologies, which further supports the conceptualization of both beings as one syncretized being. For instance, Saint Barbara shares Sango's connection to lightning and fire. After Saint Barbara's father killed her for converting to Christianity, he was struck by lightning and consumed by fire.[275] This is similar to the punishment allotted to those who anger Sango. Saint Peter, who is Esu's counterpart, is known as a keeper of keys and opener of doors,[276] which fits Esu's conceptualized role as mediator between realms. His other counterpart, Saint Anthony, is viewed as an old, frail, poorly dressed man in the same way that Esu is.[277] Whether it is

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[271] Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Comparative Studies in Religion and Society ; 4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.277
[272] Akinyemi, Tiskhen et al., p.26
[273] Herskovits, p.637
[274] Apter, p.243
[275] Akinyemi, Falola and Tishken, in Tishken et al, p.12
[276] Herskovits, p.637
[277] Ibid.

appearance, historical similarities, or perceived roles, there are threads of similarity that informed the choice of which Catholic saints would represent the Yoruba deities to form this syncretic tradition.

One other difference between Afro-Caribbean/Afro-Brazilian religions and traditional Yoruba religions concerns the impact of slavery on devotees, and the resulting impact on their divine conceptualizations. The conception of Esu and Sango in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions reveals the tragic history of colonialism and slavery. For instance, Sango becomes a salvific divine being who is expected to save his followers from the horrors that they are experiencing. This assumedly follows from the idea that Sango is primarily concerned with justice and fairness and lets out his wrath on those who are unjust, which means that he would want to rescue all facing injustice. Below is an excerpt of a Sango praise poem, originating from descendants of West African slaves in Brazil:

"…O! king, hasten here

My Lord of the ceaseless rain

Come with thunder stones to the aid of the children of Irese

O! king, hasten here

Come and deliver me,

The fearful king, hasten here.

Your royal majesty,

A strange land is difficult to live in..."[278]

This praise poem confirms the link to the primordial Sango through the reference to 'thunder stones', and a link to the historical Sango through referring to him as 'king' and 'your royal majesty.' More importantly, however, it demonstrates the role that Sango takes on due to the fate of his devotees. Because they are slaves in a foreign land, Sango takes on the role of the divine being to whom they can call for rescue, protection, and guidance. Thus, the syncretic Sango's conceptualization is directly shaped by the circumstances of his devotees.

While the circumstance of slavery turns Sango into an "agent of deliverance"[279] to his devotees, it turns Esu into a divine being who is aged, broken and distraught by the horrors that his devotees have to face. To demonstrate this syncretic conceptualization of Esu or Papa Legba as he is known in Haiti, below is an extract of the ground-breaking book on Haitian Vodou, *Mama Lola*:

"In preparation for ceremonies, this door is opened to allow passage for the spirits. A candle is lighted, and small offerings for Legba are left at the threshold… When Alourdes and her ritual assistants processed to the Legba shrine, singing, "Papa Legba, ouvri barye [Papa Legba, open the gate]" as they do at the beginning of every such event, they found a dark hallway and a closed and locked door. Alourdes retreated into stony silence. Tension quickly spread through the group and, before anyone knew what was happening, Legba had possessed Alourdes. Her

[278] Wande Abimbola, 'The Yoruba Traditional Religion in Brazil: Problems and Prospects', *Seminar Series*, Number 1.1, (Ile-Ife, Nigeria: Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Ife, 1976-77), pp.34-35
[279] Herskovits, p.367

tremendous frame plunked itself down in the middle of the narrow hallway, and the venerable

spirit riding her cried and whined about his mistreatment in the thin, cracked voice of one of the

ancients. Tears sprang to Maggie's eyes, too, but she quickly covered them with a brusque take-

charge attitude. With one arm around the whimpering Legba, Maggie sent people scurrying to

fetch the things needed."[280]

Legba, the syncretic Esu, poignantly bears evidence of the direct impact that history and trauma

can have on a divine being's conceptualization. Due to the intimacy with which people engage

with *Òrìṣà*, it follows that the pain and tiredness of Esu's devotees would be directly placed onto

him. Because he has undergone such suffering with his devotees, he is no longer the young,

amused, enigmatic divine being that he is in the Yoruba religious tradition. Instead, he is "a

feeble old man in rags, leaning on a crutch and with a pipe."[281] He is a divine being who cries,

and feels mistreated. This is another distinct demonstration of the syncretic understanding of

divine beings in the Yoruba pantheon beyond West Africa.

3.3.3. Syncretism and Sango

The third instance of syncretism, which I will briefly explore, uses the term 'syncretism' even

more loosely, to explore the interesting conceptualization of Sango in Yorubaland. As previously

mentioned, the current conceptualization of Sango is made up of the combination of two beings –

the primordial Sango, and the historical Sango. The exact details of how these two beings came

to be conceptualized as one are not entirely clear. There are a number of possible reasons that

[280] Brown, p.46
[281] Morris, p.196

have been suggested by scholars of Yoruba religion. The first of these reasons is that both beings, in their separate forms, share an association with anger, danger, and wrath. When the historical Sango ascended to the heavens and became deified, he seemed to have merged into the primordial Sango[282] because of these shared personality traits. This is similar to the process of syncretism involving Yoruba deities and their Catholic counterparts; both are based on shared qualities.

Some scholars suggest that these shared qualities did not lead to a merging of two beings, but rather a replacement of one being by another. They suggest that the current conceptualization of Sango is one of the historical Sango, and that any apparent similarities with the primordial Sango are reflective of the qualities that the two beings already shared – they do not reveal any form of syncretism. Therefore, because the historical Sango was so similar to the primordial Sango, he "practically usurped"[283] his place in the Yoruba pantheon. In a similar vein, some scholars suggest that the historical Sango was a devoted follower of the primordial Sango during his time on earth, and this explains why he replaced him or merged into him when he was deified.[284] Yet another idea suggests that the historical Sango was a physical manifestation of the primordial Sango while he was sojourning on earth.[285] Therefore, when the historical Sango dies and ascends to the heavens, this is actually the primordial Sango choosing to end his stay on earth. According to this notion, there was always only one Sango. These ideas concerning the conceptualization of Sango demonstrate the complexity of what, on the surface, seems like a

[282] David Baillie Welch, *Voice of Thunder, Eyes of Fire: In Search of Shango in the African Diaspora* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance, 2001), p.39
[283] Akinyemi, Tishken et al., p.28
[284] Arinpe Adejumo 'The Practice and Worship of Sango in Contemporary Yorubaland', in Tishken et al., p.46
[285] Ibid., p.47

perfectly common conceptualization of a divine being. This is evidence of the need to explore these divine conceptualizations and tease apart the different fragments and histories that exist within one single conceptualization.

3.3.4. Conclusion

In this section, I have used 'syncretism' as a term to indicate instances of entanglement and amalgamation of concepts. None of the "negative theological assumptions about religions of mixed origins"[286] appear here. Neither does my use of the term lead to the type of discrimination against indigenous traditions, as Graham Harvey suggested it does when he wrote: "The very notion that [indigenous religions] might have influence or impact is negated by polemical words like 'syncretism' (as if hybridity were a peculiarity rather than a norm)."[287] These instances of syncretism explored above demonstrate the distinct influence and impact that Yoruba religion has had. Furthermore, although hybridity is a norm, it is still worth studying the different specific instances of it. Yoruba divine conceptualizations offer prime ground for looking at the mechanisms of syncretism within religion. I have shown the complex and interesting instances of syncretism associated with Yoruba religion in order to demonstrate its value and potential to enrich the field of Religious Studies, if studied more.

The conceptualization of Esu as the devil within Yoruba Christianity is strong evidence for the fact that "the activity of fusing, 'mixing' or 'blending' different domains does not present a

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[286] Leopold et al., p.8
[287] *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. by Graham Harvey, 1 edition (London, New York: Routledge, 2015), p.454

problem to the human mind."[288] Teasing apart and looking at the blurry boundaries of these divine conceptualizations reveals much about the human need to make sense of the unknown through the known. It also provides insight into our wider thinking about history, religio-cultural adaptation, and human psychology, making this a potentially fruitful area of research. The conceptualizations of Esu and Sango outside of West Africa reveal the impact that historical events and human trauma can have on the conceptualization of divine beings. The syncretic Esu especially demonstrates the intimacy and humanity that exists in conceptualizations of *Òrìṣà*, which is worth studying further. Finally, the complex conceptualization of Sango represents the layers within divine conceptualizations that might not be immediately visible but warrant some examination.

The study of syncretic divine conceptualizations also reveals a way to study ATR in the fluid forms that it exists today, rather than looking for some historical, static version of these religions. As Peel states, "Of course, we may quite legitimately seek to determine what a culture or religion was, at some point when external forces first encountered it; but we should not forget how little of this is a given, how much it must be reconstructed from an analysis of the encounter."[289] The study of syncretism becomes beneficial for ATR because it avoids the misled and ultimately fruitless attempts to discover some ideal pre-colonial version of these religious traditions, and focuses on the interesting ways that they exist today.

CHAPTER 4: RELEVANCE BEYOND ACADEMIA

[288] Leopold et al., p.9
[289] Peel, 'The Pastor and the Babalawo', p.339

4.1. Summary

In this thesis, I have described Yoruba conceptualizations of three divine beings: Olodumare, Esu, and Sango, and examined the way they reveal distinct and interesting ways of understanding three concepts: worship, gender, and syncretism, as they relate to religion. Under worship, I examined how a more diverse and nuanced understanding of worship helps us observe how Olodumare is an object of worship, despite not being worshipped in the same way as the *Òrìṣà*. I also explored the concept of gender as it relates to the conceptualizations of Yoruba divine beings. Although Olodumare and Esu are conceptualized in Yoruba oral tradition as gender-neutral and androgynous respectively, I maintained the use of male pronouns because they are conceptualized as male more often among devotees and scholars of Yoruba religion. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider what the conceptualization of these beings might contribute to studies of gender, sex, sexuality, and queerness in relation to religion, and how these conceptualizations might evolve as our ideas of gender develop. Finally, I explored the ways that Esu and Sango are syncretized in Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean religions. In this section, I also examined Sango's conceptualization under a wide understanding of syncretism.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I will consider the implications of these discussions beyond academia, through the lens of the colonial legacy of 'monstrosity' attached to ATRs. Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted how the ideas contained in Yoruba divine conceptualizations can contribute to and enrich the academic study of religion. However, the potential implications beyond academia are of equal, if not greater, importance. The introduction to this thesis discussed the negative impact of the historical and academic treatment of ATRs on African

communities. Today, religions like Christianity and Islam are treated as 'valid' religions in

African communities, while traditional religions are still treated as pre-modern and irrational.[290]

This is due to their framing as such by nineteenth century Christian missionaries and scholars

who operated under evolutionist assumptions. The legacy of the colonial encounter is still

powerfully evident. A more accurate and considered portrayal of ATRs within academia, which

deeply engages with them instead of ignoring them or categorizing them as superstition, has the

power to positively influence their perception in non-academic settings. In this final chapter, I

will explore the potential positive implications of a deeper academic consideration of ATRs,

specifically focusing on those implications that relate to African self-understanding and integrity.

I will explore these implications through the lens of the colonial legacy of 'monstrosity' attached

to ATRs that has negatively impacted the self-understanding of ATR practitioners and wider

African communities. I will begin by explaining how this legacy is observed in the treatment of

ATRs, before demonstrating how a more considered inclusion of ATRs in academia has the

power to dismantle it.

4.1. Dismantling the Colonial Legacy of Monstrosity

"If you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any

reflection of themselves."[291]

- Junot Diaz

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[290] Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Traditional, African, Religious, Freedom?', *The Immanent Frame*
<https://tif.ssrc.org/2013/01/07/traditional-african-religious-freedom/>
[291] Carrie Stetler, 'Junot Diaz: Man in the Mirror'
<https://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/2009/10/junot_diaz_man_in_the_mirror.html>

In conversations about diversity and representation in the media, this quote by the Dominican-American author Junot Diaz is often cited. It also describes the issues faced by ATRs both within and beyond academia. ATRs are denied a reflection of themselves in numerous ways, starting with the lack of recognition under the Religious Studies framework, which has been the focus of this thesis. Religions like Christianity are able to see reflections of themselves, while ATRs are deprived of a similar reflection by being denied the label of religion. Beyond academia, ATRs face a lack of recognition and reflection in global and local conversations about religion, which use definitions of religion that are based in private, internal belief, as opposed to ritual practice.[292] They are not recognized in the majority of African countries' constitutions[293] and are often denied access to religious freedoms and legal rights.[294] As Kenyan scholar Makua Mutua notices, "African constitutions and laws are generally either openly hostile to African religions…or they pretend that such religions do not exist."[295] Even a walk through African towns and cities further reveals the absence of ATRs, with prominently displayed mosques and churches and almost no observable traces of traditional religions. If there are any, they are small, hidden and secretive.[296] This hiddenness is also observable in the aforementioned Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian syncretic religions which hid the worship of West African divine beings behind the outwardly visible worship of Catholic saints.

[292] Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Regulating Religious Freedom in Africa Religious and Legal Pluralism in Comparative Theoretical Perspective', *Emory International Law Review*, 2, 2011, p.878
[293] With the exception of a few countries, such as Benin and South Africa, that have some recognition of ATRs in their constitution.
[294] Amoah and Tom Bennett, p.358
[295] Makua Mutua, 'Returning to my Roots: African "Religions" and the State', in *Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination in Africa*, ed. Abd Allāh Aḥmad Naʿim, Religion & Human Rights Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), p.177
[296] I recognize that there are no strict designated places of worship, but even the places where people visit traditional healers and diviners are hidden. Furthermore, there are elements of secrecy that are important to traditional religious practices, but here I am talking about the secrecy involved in hiding their practice out of fear of discrimination or accusations of Satanism.

This absence of reflection creates a sense of otherness, abnormality, and illegitimacy that is implied in the idea of monstrosity evoked by the Junot Diaz quote above. The striking absence of ATRs in numerous contexts implies either that they do not exist and are therefore unreal or illegitimate as religions, or that they should not exist and are therefore abnormal or 'other'. This idea is compounded by the negative images and perceptions that fill the gap left by the absence of accurate reflections of ATRs. The colonial picture of Africans as primitive savages who engage in 'monstrous' practices, witchcraft and superstition is a picture of monstrosity that dominated the perception of ATR in the colonial period.[297] Although this image is not prevalent today, traces of it remain in the perception of ATRs in African communities. This is especially evident in two areas - their characterization as Satanic, and their characterization as witchcraft. I briefly touched upon the former in my discussion of Esu as the devil. However, the characterization of ATRs as Satanic extends beyond the individual divine beings within these religions. As Rosalind Hackett notices, in African countries which are majority Christian, there are constant "accusations of Satanism from Africa's ever-burgeoning evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic sector."[298]

These accusations of Satanism, which are outright accusations of monstrosity, do not come from these sectors alone, as a recent event in Uganda demonstrates. In 2016, Rebecca Kadaga, the Ugandan Speaker of Parliament, was filmed visiting a shrine, which is also currently considered a Ugandan cultural site. She was doing so to promote tourism and showcase this site, but also to

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[297] David Chidester, 'Colonialism and Religion', *Critical Research on Religion*, 1.1 (2013), p.90
[298] Hackett, 'Regulating Religious Freedom in Africa Religious and Legal Pluralism in Comparative Theoretical Perspective', p.874

visit her ancestors299 and inform them of her position as speaker of parliament.300 She was

verbally attacked by the former Ethics Minister and others, who called her a 'devil-worshipper'

and insisted that visiting the shrine was an inappropriate action for a speaker of parliament.301

One might think that this kind of response would be provoked by any practices that are not

Christian, as Uganda identifies as a Christian country. However, this kind of vitriol does not

occur in response to Islamic or Hindu religious practices, which are common in Uganda.

Although inter-religious conflict certainly occurs, this kind of response is only considered

acceptable, even in government, when it is targeting traditional religious practices. The

monstrosity attached to ATRs makes it acceptable, and even right, to attack ATRs in this way. In

labelling ATRs as evil, they become a target and an abomination that should be removed from

African communities.

Similarly, the characterization of the entirety of ATR as witchcraft frames them as monstrous.

This characterization is common in African communities. When I have asked African family and

friends about their views on ATR, the most common response I have received is "you mean

witchcraft?" The only responses that did not categorize ATR as witchcraft came from people that

had studied ATR in some way, had family members that were practitioners of ATR or were

practitioners of ATR themselves. In other words, to refer back to the Junot Diaz quote, they had

a reflection of ATRs available to them beyond the image of monstrosity that is so prevalent in

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299 I have not discussed ancestors in this thesis, because there is debate about whether ancestors can be considered divine beings. This discussion was beyond the scope of this thesis. The relevant point is that this was perceived and criticized as a religious action.
300 'I Am No Devil Worshipper – Kadaga', *Daily Monitor* <https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/I-am-no-devil-worshipper-Kadaga/688334-3224334-y9agd9/index.html>
301 'Matembe Attacks Kadaga over Shrine Visit', *New Vision* <http://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1425319/matembe-attacks-kadaga-shrine-visit>

African communities. Before going further, it is worth clarifying what I mean by witchcraft. In many ATRs, the spiritual world is perceived as amoral.[302] This is why divine beings like Esu can have conceptualizations that appear to be both malevolent and benevolent. As Stephen Ellis notices, "Spiritual forces, traditionally, were seen as intrinsically neither good nor bad, although their power could be channeled for moral or immoral purposes."[303] Witchcraft is generally defined as the use of those powers for immoral purposes.

Adam Ashforth's book *Madumo, a Man Bewitched* presents a clear example of the relationship between ATR and witchcraft.[304] In the book, Ashforth follows a South African man named Madumo who believes himself to be the victim of witchcraft. Madumo consults a religious traditional healer, who confirms that Madumo has been the victim of witchcraft and helps him to overcome it through traditional divining and healing. The healer and the supposed 'witch' who cursed Madumo are operating in the same tradition, but the healer is channeling the moral, and the 'witch' is channeling the immoral. What is clear from this example is that witchcraft is not the entirety of the religious tradition.[305] Labelling ATR as witchcraft is similar to labelling Christianity as Satanism, simply because of the belief that Satan exists in opposition to God.

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[302] Olupona, *A Very Short Introduction*, p.36

[303] Stephen Ellis, 'Witching-times: A Theme in the Histories of Africa and Europe', in *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*, ed. by Ter Haar Gerrie (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2006), p.46

[304] Adam Ashforth, *Madumo, a Man Bewitched* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[305] Another question that arises from Ashforth's exploration of witchcraft in South Africa is whether witchcraft is an integral part of ATR. If healing from witchcraft is a significant part of ATR, then it is possible that in some way, witchcraft might be integral to ATR. While this is an interesting and complex question, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the question in the depth that it requires. This thesis is concerned with simply showing that ATRs are more than the 'demonic', 'monstrous' and harmful agendas they are accused of when they are characterized as witchcraft. For a deeper discussion of witchcraft and its relationship to ATR, see: Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Therefore, when I refer to the characterization of ATR as witchcraft, I refer to the blanket labelling of all elements of ATRs, even those that appear to be good or moral, as witchcraft.

This characterization is fueled by a fear-based focus on the negative aspects of these traditions and fictional accounts that feed this fear. For instance, the popular Nigerian film market, which is known as Nollywood, frequently releases films that encourage negative stereotypes of ATRs. The film plots consistently feature traditional rituals being used to kill or bring harm, with no positive representation to offer a different perspective.[306] It is also fueled by speculation and accusations from members within the African community, often paired with the aforementioned accusations of Satanism, such as in the case of the Ugandan Speaker of Parliament. The characterization of witchcraft, then, does not come from actual reflections of ATRs, but distorted reflections that are based in fear, fiction, and speculation. This accusation of witchcraft is ultimately dangerous, because it encourages an image of ATR practitioners as sub-human or inhuman, which condones both verbal and physical attacks. Elderly women and children, who are the most frequently accused of witchcraft, and others accused have been isolated, tortured and killed.[307]

ATR practitioners commonly report feeling ashamed of their traditional religious practices and feeling that they have to hide them.[308] An admission of practicing these religious traditions

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[306] 'Nollywood Looks to the Future', *New Internationalist*, 2004
<https://newint.org/columns/viewfrom/2004/10/01/nollywood>
[307] Mensah Adinkrah, 'Child Witch Hunts in Contemporary Ghana', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35.9 (2011), pp.749-750
[308] A. Winkler and others, 'Attitudes towards African Traditional Medicine and Christian Spiritual Healing Regarding Treatment of Epilepsy in a Rural Community of Northern Tanzania', *African Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicines*, 7.2 (2010), p.163

would be, to some, an admission of dealing with the irrational, with evil, the grotesque – the 'monstrous'. As such, it opens them up to attack and discrimination. I would argue also that the framing of ATRs with monstrosity has a subconscious impact on African self-understanding. Perceiving ATRs as monstrous means perceiving the pre-colonial image of Africans as subhuman, implying that in the absence of the 'civilizing' influence of Christianity (or of Western culture more broadly), Africans remain irrational and barbarous. It implies that the true image of Africans, without external influence, is one of monstrous beliefs and practices in need of discipline. This is a heartbreaking subconscious consequence of the colonial legacy of monstrosity that is still present today. It is an indication that the dismantling of this legacy is not just important to the self-understanding of practitioners of ATR, but to African self-understanding and humanity.

These monstrous characterizations of ATRs explored above are largely a result of a lack of representation and representations that falsely display negative images of ATRs as the only images of ATRs. As I mentioned previously, those who see beyond this image of monstrosity are those who have more accurate and full reflections of ATRs available to them. Therefore, more accurate reflections, which involve a considered study of ATRs, have the power to dismantle the colonial legacy of monstrosity. We can already observe this power in small ways. The academic conversation about Esu's conflation with the Christian devil recently began to appear in colloquial conversations about Yoruba religion. Currently, there are multiple YouTube videos, blog posts and social media posts that engage with the complex history of how Esu came to be labelled as the devil in West Africa. [309] On Twitter, the hashtag #EsuIsNotSatan appears in over a

[309] Dele Meiji, 'Esu Is Not the Devil: How a Yoruba Deity Got Rebranded', *OkayAfrica*, 2017 <https://www.okayafrica.com/yoruba-esu-is-not-the-devil/>

hundred posts, with many posts explaining that while the name Esu might be used to replace

Satan in Yoruba Christianity, the Yoruba divine being Esu is not an embodiment of evil, lacking

all morality and goodness, as the devil is conceptualized in Christianity.[310] This is a current

example of the impact that engaging with these ideas is having in colloquial contexts. If we

continue to have these considered academic discussions about ATRs, there can be more instances

like this where academic examinations offer reflections of ATRs that are not detrimental to the

self-understanding of ATR practitioners, and encourage more positive perceptions within

African communities.

These considered academic discussions have implications on an even larger scale. Jason Ananda

Josephson, in the conclusion to his book *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, lists a number of

diverse processes through which a religion is invented, or through which a religion becomes

recognized as a religion. One of those processes, according to Josephson, is the studying of the

religion within the field of Religious Studies. As he states, "To be studied as a religion by our

discipline transforms the dialogue. At the very least, it changes religions' self-representation,

their relationship to other religions, and their relationship to the legal system."[311] This quote

encapsulates my motivation for this thesis. The presence of a religion within the Religious

Studies framework is crucial to its legitimacy on a global and local sphere. This legitimacy

would acknowledge and be a vehicle for an understanding of ATRs that directly counters the

colonial legacy of monstrosity.

[310] I searched Twitter for the hashtag #EsuIsNotSatan, which revealed hundreds of posts, dating back to
2014: https://twitter.com/search?q=esuisnotsatan&src=typed_query&f=live
[311] Josephson, p.259

Furthermore, religion is a powerful term in political, social, legal, academic, and numerous other contexts. Because of their association with the 'irrational' and 'monstrous' (even unconsciously so), ATRs often have no representation in local interfaith conversations, no political representation, and no religious rights in African countries.[312] To achieve any kind of legal rights, they have to frame their cases under cultural rights, which are often not as strong as religious rights.[313] A similar phenomenon consistently occurs with Indigenous religious rights in Canadian and American courts.[314] This lack of power stems partly from their historical characterization as monstrous, primitive, inferior, and irrational. Through more engagement with ATRs in academia, we can shed light on the issues with this historical characterization, problematize definitions of religion that are currently used in local and global contexts, and provide alternative definitions that are more inclusive of indigenous religions. The perception of ATRs can be rectified to give them the same legitimacy, representation and rights that other religions enjoy.

Finally, with this legitimacy, ideas within ATR are able to generate positive implications beyond religion. For instance, ATRs can act as a locus to reclaim ideas and identities that have been labelled as un-African, thus alienating Africans who might identify with them. [315] One prominent example of this in African countries today is the rhetoric that labels homosexuality as un-African. This rhetoric is being advanced by African governments that have chosen to outlaw

[312] Amoah and Bennett, p.358
[313] Amoah and Bennett, p.3
[314] See cases like *Ktunaxa Nation v. British Columbia* (Forest, Lands and Natural Resource Operations) [2017] SCC 54, or similar themes explored by Tisa Wenger in the American context in *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
[315] Thabo Msibi, 'The Lies We Have Been Told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa', *Africa Today*, 58.1 (2011), p.55

homosexuality and is widely accepted by many members of African communities. It can, however, easily be challenged if we look at the oral traditions within ATRs.[316] These oral traditions, representing centuries of African history and culture, contain a wide range of ideas about gender and sexuality. As explored in previous chapters, the understanding of gender in relation to Yoruba divine beings and other divine beings in ATRs, is far from one that only acknowledges male and female gender identities. Androgynous and gender-neutral ideas are also present, which indicates a place for these ideas within African culture. Esu's androgyny, tied to his conceptualization as hyper-sexual, also indicates a presence of homosexuality and other ideas of sexuality. The existence of these concepts within ATR oral traditions logically unravels the labelling of them as un-African and provides a place for Africans who identify with gender identities or sexualities that have been wrongly labelled 'un-African' to reclaim them. Because they have previously been framed and dismissed as monstrous, these ideas might not have had the power to create a different understanding. However, with the legacy of monstrosity eliminated, ATRs can be a place of protest, and alternative self-understanding.[317]

Junot Diaz, in his discussion of representation and monstrosity, states that the inspiration for his work is to "make some mirrors so that kids like me might seem themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it."[318] This is the reason why it is important to have considered explorations of ATR within the Religious Studies framework – so that practitioners of ATR might see themselves reflected and not feel a sense of shame or fear associated with their

[316] Ibid.
[317] Oguibe, p.36
[318] Carrie Stetler, 'Junot Diaz: Man in the Mirror'
<https://www.nj.com/entertainment/arts/2009/10/junot_diaz_man_in_the_mirror.html>

practices. The religions that are born out of an African culture are as complex, legitimate and fully human as any other.

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