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**African Traditional Religion in Contemporary  
Africa: The Case of Ghana**

Yaw Sarkodie Agyeman  
University of Cape Coast  
Department of Religion & Human Values  
Cape Coast  
Ghana  
E. Mail: yagyemang@ucc.edu.gh

Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye  
University of Cape Coast  
Department of Religion & Human Values  
Cape Coast  
Ghana  
E. Mail: awuah.nyamekye@ucc.edu.gh

**Abstract**

Globalisation does not permit any religion to be an island to itself. Indigenous cultures all over the world bear the brunt of a consequent of globalisation--religious pluralism. On the continent of Africa, the five major world religions, notably Christianity and Islam, are slugging it out against each other and, most of the time, collectively against the indigenous religion of the African. Besides the challenges religious pluralism poses to the indigenous religion, Africa, like never before is being opened up for investment and the intrusion of the mass media and the internet. This paper is a general survey examining how the traditional religion of the African is responding to these realities using Ghana as a case study. It aims at an understanding of the current manifestation/s of the religion. The paper observes that syncretism has been used to analyse the current expression of the religion, but the paper takes

the position that syncretism is not an adequate theory to explain current developments in the religion. It rather, advocates the theories of the market and religious field as additional theories to explain current developments in the religious space in Africa, and for that matter, Ghana. The paper notes that though there is competition in the market, especially from impinging religions especially Christianity and Islam, opportunities have been opened to the indigenous religion making it to assume a transnational posture. It concludes that the future of African Traditional Religion will largely depend on its ability to respond to market realities in order to be continuously relevant to contemporary society.

**Keywords:**

African Traditional Religion, syncretism, market, religious pluralism, globalisation,

**Introduction**

Culture has universally been viewed as dynamic. This implies that religion being one of the key elements of culture, cannot remain static but as a matter of necessity, must move along with its mother-culture. Religious ecology also points out that whenever two religions come into contact, a sort of intermarriage between the two is bound to occur. This intermarriage may either be positive or negative. In the words of Huston Smith:

Every religion is a blend of universal principles and local setting. The former, when lifted out and made clear, speak to man as man, whatever his time or place. The later, a rich compound of myth and rite can never make its way into the emotional life of an outsider...<sup>1</sup>

What is being emphasised here is that in view of the realities of globalisation, no religion can claim to be without the slightest influence of those it has come into contact with.

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<sup>1</sup> Huston Smith, *The Religion of Man*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1958), p. 4.

This paper examines the current manifestations of African Traditional Religion in Africa with particular reference to Ghana. It aims at examining the state of African Traditional Religion in Ghana today in the face of the impinging faiths and the realities of globalisation. Even though this paper draws extensively on the existing literature on African Traditional Religion, the discussion is done in the light of the current trends in the religion in Ghana. In this way, we believe the paper will be making a modest contribution to the discourse on the spirituality of the African. The discussion will centre on the following themes: the challenges the religion is facing in contemporary society of religious pluralism in Africa; the effect of these challenges on the religion; the opportunities existing in today's society and lastly, how the religion is negotiating itself in the face of these challenges and opportunities.

We are aware of the age-long debate over whether the spirituality of the African should be known either in the singular or plural form. That is, African Traditional Religion or African Traditional Religions.<sup>2</sup> This, however, is not the focus of this paper now, for the arguments involved cannot be discussed here due to requirement of length for a paper like this. In this paper, however, the singular form is adopted and this is used throughout.

## Challenges faced by African Traditional Religion

In this section, we shall examine the factors that militate against the existence of African Traditional Religion in contemporary Ghana. Many of the challenges the religion is facing in contemporary society have been identified already. Bascom and Idowu writing about the Nigeria situation identified the challenge impinging religions, especially Christianity, pose to the indigenous religion of the African. On the effect of Christianity on the *Ifa* divinatory and other cults, Bascom observed thus: 'Although alien religions have had less effect on *Ifa* than on some other cults, there has still been considerable attrition because men who would normally have filled these posts have given up *Ifa* in favour of Christianity and Islam.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See for example John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nairobi, Kampala, Dar-es-Salaam: East African Educational Publishers, 1991); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Heinemann, 1989) and E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition*. (London: SCM, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> William W. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 91.

Idowu alludes to the same development in Nupe religion. <sup>4</sup> He also notes other factors such as urbanisation and Western formal education as factors challenging the indigenous religion of the African. <sup>5</sup> The same observation was made on our field study in

Ghana. One priest told us that he had not been able to celebrate his god's annual festival for years because all his children who used to help him during worship had become Christians. Some of the shrines either do not have attendants or are attended to by elderly people. The once powerful Ntoa deity of Sekyere Kwaman has been neglected for more than three decades after the death of the priestess Nana Ataa. A research carried out by Awuah-Nyamekye <sup>6</sup> revealed that powerful shrines like *Kukuo*, *Diamono*, *Apomasu*, *Tigare* and *Mframa* which took centre stage in traditional Akan worship years ago are now completely wiped out either for lack of priests to attend to the gods or worshippers to assist the priests in worship. Earlier studies and our current studies confirm that the death of cult functionaries without replacing them is one major challenge faced by the indigenous religion. Impinging religions, urbanisation and western formal education are the causal factors.

One major problem of the religion is what we described as the misunderstanding of the 'outsider' and incomprehensibility of the 'insider'. One can arguably say that there is no religion in the world which has been misunderstood than the indigenous religion of the African. Consequently, it has been subjected to the most negative stereotyping than any of the world's religious traditions. <sup>7</sup> The reason for this is not far-fetched. i) Beginning in the 16th century, Westerners attempted to justify the enslavement of African peoples by claiming that Africans lacked a sense of both history and religion. ii) It also stems from the notion that anything that does not conform to a certain cultural pattern accepted as the norm by the Western investigator is regarded automatically as primitive; that is, that which belongs to the category of those things which have somehow been left behind in the race of cultural sophistication. 'Primitive' in this connection means, categorically,

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<sup>4</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional*, 81

<sup>5</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional*, 83

<sup>6</sup> S. Awuah-Nyamekye, S. *Divination: its nature and meaning in Berekum traditional area*. . (Verlag: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing GmbH & Co. GK, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> B. Ray, *African Religions: Symbols, Ritual, and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 2-14.

'backward', 'rude', or 'uncouth'.<sup>8</sup> This notion seems to have been buttressed by what the Western Europeans saw on their arrival on the west coast of the African continent. On their arrival, they were expecting to see a priest in charge of the worship of the Supreme Being (God); a place of worship dedicated specifically to the worship of God like temples, cathedrals and mosques and a sort of written scriptures such as Bible, Quran and the Bhagavad Gita. Since they did not see any, they concluded that the African did not know God. So they had to introduce God to him. Emil Ludwig, for instance, says: 'How can the untutored Africans conceive God? ...

How can this be? ... Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing'.<sup>9</sup> Mary Kingsley also says: 'When I say juju or fetish I mean the religion of the native of West Africa.'<sup>10</sup> For Sir Richard Burton: 'The negro is still at the dawn of faith - fetishism -- and he has barely advanced to idolatry... He has never grasped the idea of a personal Deity, a duty in life, a moral code or a shame of lying.'<sup>11</sup>

In consequence, African Traditional Religion was described in highly objectionable, obnoxious, derogatory and abusive terms, some of which include: fetishism, animism, paganism, heathenism, native religion, tribal religion, salvage religion, idolatry, polytheism, magic, superstition, ancestor worship, witchcraft and so on but African Traditional Religion is none of the above. Earlier writers like Idowu<sup>12</sup> and Opoku<sup>13</sup> have shown that at worst, these terms are derogatory as they portray cultural pride and spiritual arrogance in the early missionaries and at best, they are inadequate to describe the totality of the indigenous religion of the African. Moreover, a critical observation shows that aspects of some of these terms can be found in the so-called universal religions but the terms are never used to denote any of these religions. Unfortunately, up to today these terms are used by some scholars and theologians to describe African Traditional Religion. For example, indigenous adherents of Southern Sudan are regularly referred to by the world's press as animists. The continuous use of

<sup>8</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 109.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin E. Smith, *African Ideas of God: A Symposium* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950), 1 and Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 88.

<sup>10</sup> As quoted by Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 14. See also Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, (Accra, Bangkok, Hong Kong: FEP. International, 1978), 3-6.

<sup>11</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religions*, (London: The Clarendon Press, 1965), 231.

<sup>12</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 109.

<sup>13</sup> Opoku, *West African*, 3-6.

these derogatory terms creates a wrong picture in the minds of people as to the nature of the religion.

The sad aspect of the problem is that the nature of the religion makes it difficult to understand it. The difficulty seems to come from the fact that 'its propagation is carried out by living it rather than preaching it. Its followers are more preoccupied with its practice than with its theory.<sup>14</sup> With the exception of certain secret cults in indigenous Africa, religion is not an organisation that people formally become members. Thus, the use of English words like 'worshippers' and 'believers' betray the uncritical reliance of Christian vocabulary to describe this indigenous phenomenon. It is, however, difficult to avoid using them.

Even within the academia the nature of the indigenous religion is constantly debated. Mbiti,<sup>15</sup> Idowu<sup>16</sup> and others have tried to outline systematic beliefs and practices which to them serve as the corpus of the religion. These are the belief in the Supreme God believed to be the creator of the world; the belief in lesser deities who serve as agents of the Supreme God and the belief in the ancestors who though dead are regarded as bona fide members of respective families. Others are the belief that the world is populated by numerous and nameless spirits and the practice of magic, witchcraft, sacrifice, libation and festivals among others. Those holding this position, like Mbiti, see religion to pervade all aspects of the life of the African.

Platvoet and Rinsum strongly aver that this position of Mbiti and others is an "invention of tradition" highly influenced by 19th Protestant liberal theology which posits that humans are inherently religious.<sup>17</sup> By "invention of tradition" they mean "paradigmatic identity constructs of a particular group of people at a time of swift and un-settling change, by which they construct, and claim, continuity of identity with a suitable, but mainly mythical past."<sup>18</sup> Platvoet and Rinsum partly influenced by earlier studies like p'Bitek study of the Central Luo of Kenya and Platvoet studies among the Akan of Ghana and the Bushmen of Namibia argued that there must be serious historical studies to arrive at the pre-colonial and colonial manifestations of the indigenous religion of

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<sup>14</sup> R. Nnyombi, "African Traditional Religion" <http://afgen.com/atr.html>. Accessed 21 May 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Mbiti, *African religions*

<sup>16</sup> Idowu, *African traditional religion*

<sup>17</sup> Jan Platvoet & Henk van Rinsum, "Is Africa incurably religious?," *Exchange*, January 2003. DOI: 10.1163/157254303X00190

<sup>18</sup> Platvoet & Rinsum, "Is Africa..?", 7-8

the African. They tentatively conclude that the nature of the native religion of the African during pre-colonial and colonial periods: 1. was not pervasive but rather occasionally erupted during life crisis and during the long period of lull, steps were taken not to provoke the need for expensive rituals; 2. the so called permeation of religion was not uniform across institutions, events and society. There were some institutions which were not 'permeated' by religion and 3. even in rituals where religion was present, it (religion) was not central as the focus was on the purpose of the ritual but not religion. They conclude that "All in all, the role of Akan religion in Akan precolonial society seems subdued, casual, pragmatic and 'secular' rather than central, fervent, deep and thorough."<sup>19</sup>

For the sake of brevity, we cannot engage these disparities in the discussion on the nature of African indigenous religion. We briefly comment on the discussion that on the extreme end are those who are under the influence of Durkheim's school of thought and therefore the absence of a 'church' and a systematic statement of beliefs in Africa, deny the presence of 'religion' among Africans. On the other end of the pole, are those who see religion in everything the African does.

It is worthy to conclude these discussions on the nature of the religion by making a poignant point. The discussions reveal one sad truth. The religion of the African does not lend itself to easy understanding especially to the non-African and 'worshippers' themselves cannot coherently explain the nature of the religion. No wonder that the misunderstanding of the nature of African religion has been the source of the tension between it and other religions, particularly Christianity. Thus, the major challenge is the lack of understanding by the 'etic' and the inability of the 'emic' to make the religion comprehensible. In the study of religion, making the outsider to understand the insider is a big challenge <sup>20</sup> but in the context of the current discussion it is accentuated by the nature of the religion.

The lack of a 'church' which serves as medium for apologetics and evangelisation and the lack of documentation in the form of scriptures have opened up the floodgate for disparaging portrayal of the religion of the African in the midst of

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<sup>19</sup> Platvoet & Van Rinsum, "Is the African...?", p.16.

<sup>20</sup> See George D. Chryssides and Ron Geaves, *The study of religion: An Introduction to key ideas and methods*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), especially chapter 3.



religious pluralism. We describe this challenge as the 'the nature of the religious field' within which the religion currently is situated.

Wacquants describe the religious field as

simultaneously a space of conflict and competition, the analogy here being with a battlefield, in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it—cultural authority in the artistic field, scientific authority in the scientific field, sacerdotal authority in the religious field, and so forth—and the power to decree the hierarchy and 'conversion rates' between all forms of authority in the field of power. In the course of these struggles, the very shape and divisions of the field become a central stake, because to alter the distribution and relative weight of forms of capital is tantamount to modifying the structure of the field. <sup>21</sup>

The current Ghana's religious field, and for that matter, that of Africa is shaped and continues to be shaped by historical factors. In the case of Ghana, colonialism and the support the church gained from her relationship with the British colonial power is relevant in this discussion. The church was more or less an arm of the colonial enterprise. <sup>22</sup> Consequently, there was colonial animosity towards the traditional religion. The introduction of formal schooling is another historical fact as the schools became the avenue for 'captured audience' for proselytising. Trading and migration made Islam to spread from the northern part of Ghana to the south. The colonial powers somehow tolerated Islam and it gained foothold across the length and breadth of the country more especially the northern part of the country. In terms of numbers, 2010 population census of Ghana gives Christianity 71.2%, Islam (17.6%), traditional religion 5.2% and those not affiliated to any religion 5.3%. Statistically, membership of the traditional religion keeps on reducing though it is argued elsewhere that statistical data is a poor way of gauging religious affiliation in Africa, especially in the

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<sup>21</sup> P. Bourdieu & L. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> See works such as E. Andrews, "Christian Missions and Colonial Empires Reconsidered: A Black Evangelist in West Africa, 1766–1816". *Journal of Church & State* 51 2010 (4): 663–691. doi:10.1093/jcs/csp090; T. Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The crisis of religious politics and secular ideologies*. (University Rochester Press, 2001) and L. Sanneth, "Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex", *The Christian Century*. *The Christian Century Foundation*. April 8, 1987, 331–334.

context of the indigenous religion.<sup>23</sup> Studies have confirmed this claim. For instance, Aylward Shorter, aptly points out that 'the African Christian does away with 'remarkably little of his former non-Christian outlook'<sup>24</sup> Mbiti and Burleson also assert that conversion to other religions does not make Africans to shed off their traditional religiosity because their indigenous worldview continues to exert influence on them.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, in terms of numbers in the religious field, it is tilted against the indigenous religion. Sacerdotal capital is largely in the hands of the Christian clergy and, to some extent, those of Islam. As it has been argued, the religious field cannot be divorced from other fields<sup>26</sup> including economic field and political fields. Christianity having won legitimacy in the religious field is also harvesting economically. It is difficult to assess the exact financial worth of the church in Africa but in the US, the contribution of religion to the American economy is estimated to be 1.2 billion dollars annually.<sup>27</sup> In spite of the opacity that churches conduct their financial affairs in Africa, a conservative estimate of the worth of five Nigeria pastors by Forbes is around 200 million dollars to 235 million dollars.<sup>28</sup> In the context of Ghana, judging from chapels and other properties of the church as an organisation and the lifestyle of some of the clergymen especially those in the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, one can unarguably say that the church is very rich.

The economic might of the church which she puts at the disposal of her evangelistic ministry, often with the traditional religion as the target makes the traditional religion to be at the disadvantage. A good example is how the indigenous religion and African culture is portrayed with the objective "to shape the terms

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<sup>23</sup> Yaw S. Agyemang, 'Multiple identities: Interrogating census figures on religious affiliation in Ghana', forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> A. Shorter, *African Christian theology*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> J. S. Mbiti, and, B. W. Burleson, *The dialogue of an African theologian with African religion*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1986). See also K. Gyekye, *African cultural values: An introduction*. (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> B. Veter, 'Spiritual capital: Theorizing religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu.' *Sociological Theory* Vol. 21, No. 2, 2003, p. 150-174.

<sup>27</sup> Brian J. Grim & Melisa Grim, "The Socio-economic Contribution of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, Volume 12 Article 3, 2016, pp. 1-31.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2011/06/07/the-five-richest-pastors-in-nigeria/#10baad176031>

of many urban people's worldview and experience...." <sup>29</sup>In a study in Nigerian, it was noted that "Nigeria video films tend to stigmatize African traditional religion and African ethical values generally as inferior to those of Christianity and as a crude and underdeveloped system...." The movies often portray traditional religion as belonging to the past and Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity as 'modern'. They portray "a cultural dichotomy of orders of signification ... where African Traditional Religion stands as a synonym for 'backwardness' and 'permissivity' while Christianity is presented as 'modern' and 'progressive.'" <sup>30</sup> This phenomenon is also found in Ghana. There are several movies and literature which target the traditional religion as being demonic, backward, dirty and the ritual actors in the religion as charlatans. There is interplay between success in the religious field and that of the economic field and both work against the traditional religion.

The relationship between these two fields has ramification in the political field and hence offers political capital to Christianity and, to an extent, Islam at the disadvantage of the indigenous religion. The religious constituency is very significant for the political fortunes of any political party in Africa and Ghana, specifically. Political power is won through numbers and Christianity and Islam have the numbers which all political parties need. During political campaigns the political worth of these two religions is very much pronounced as the two leading political parties overdo each other to win the religious constituency. Any successful political party must be in the good books of the two major religions.

A clear evidence is in governments sponsoring Muslims and, very recently Christians, to go on pilgrimage. The current New Patriotic Party (NPP) government is in the process of building a national cathedral. In doing all these, the political parties try as much as possible to refrain from direct dealings with actors in the traditional religion because this can spell their political doom. For example, the former president of Ghana, Kuffour, visited the village of the Togolese president in 2002 and a ritual involving sacrifice was done to welcome the President and his entourage. The opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC)

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<sup>29</sup> Birgit Meyer, "Popular Ghanaian Cinema and "African Heritage" in *Africa Today*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), pp. 93-114

<sup>30</sup> Brilliant Mhalanga, "African traditional religions in African films: A look at Nollywood"

seized this opportunity to portray NPP as a party of 'idol' worshippers.<sup>31</sup>

The same incident occurred in the 2015 bye-election campaign in Tallensi in the Upper West Region of Ghana. It was reported that some party executives of the opposition NPP including the Ashanti Regional party chairman consulted a shrine for success in the election. The allegation was supported by pictures of some bare chest NPP party executives. The NPP was quick to deny it but rather explained their half-nakedness was a form of ritual curtesy members of the party did in the presence of the chief of the Chinzo village. Again this was used by the political opponent, the NDC to mean that members of the NPP went to worship a 'fetish'. In both instances, the NDC sought to portray the NPP as sympathising with the traditional religion and in so doing attempted to alienate the party from Christian and Muslim voters. Politicians see it as political suicide to have direct dealings with the indigenous religion and try as much as possible to distance themselves from the religion so as not to offend the sensibilities of Christians and Muslims. It is not politically correct for a political party to associate itself with the indigenous religion. In this context, the phrase "politically correct" is used to describe a situation where there is a strict adherence to orthodox ideas and praxis.<sup>32</sup> In contemporary Ghana, religious ideas and praxis regarded to be orthodox are those from Christianity and Islam but not those from the traditional religion. Being politically correct is a form of self-censorship making people, especially, politicians to refrain from a formal associating with the traditional religion of the African.

It is not only politicians who woo the Christian clergy. There is a high perception among Ghanaians that some pastors are aligned to certain political parties. The *Independent Newspaper* even went to the extent of mentioning some leading pastors in Ghana and their political affiliations.<sup>33</sup> We conclude that currently, Christianity and to a little extent, Islam, have won the struggle for sacerdotal authority in the religious field at the expense of the indigenous religion. The consequent is that success in the religious field has attracted both economic and political capital which

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/THE-Exploits-of-Kufuor-70889>

<sup>32</sup> Caitin Gibson, "How 'politically correct' went from compliment to insult". *Washington Post*, January 13, 2016. Retrieved, 31 May 2018.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Ghana-Top-Men-of-God-and-their-political-affiliation-284741>

inadvertently or consciously feed back into success in the religious field at the chagrin of the indigenous religion.

## **Responses of the Religion to Challenges**

The traditional religion is not passive in the face of the aforementioned challenges. Some of the responses are reactionary. These reactionary responses are seen in the New Religious Movements in the religion. Other responses are in the form of accepting the challenges, identifying the opportunities in them and negotiating itself to be relevant in the current religious ecology. All these have resulted in what we call neo-African Traditional Religion.

Indeed, there is a contemporary expression of indigenous religion in Ghana. This is seen in New Religious Movements (NRMs) in the indigenous religion. Unlike the 'orthodox' African Traditional Religion with no founders and missionaries, these NRMs have founders and missionary in posture. In Ghana, the most notable one is the Afrikania Mission which was founded by an ex-Roman Catholic priest *Osofo Okomfo* Damoah.<sup>34</sup> Preceding this movement was Godianism of Nigeria founded by Chief K. O. K. Onyioha. Some of the indigenous shrines in Ghana have also become missionary in posture. A typical example is the *Akwantemfi Gyeabour* Shrine of Medoma near Kumasi in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. This shrine has branches in Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia and South Carolina all in the United States of America. Membership or clientele consists of people of both African and non-African descent.<sup>35</sup> One distinction between these NRMs and the orthodox counterpart in addition to those mentioned above, is that there is an obvious attempt on the part of the NRMs to go beyond the ethnic or cultural specific context within which the orthodox operates. They want to become universal religion not only for Africans but also for all humankind. The Afrikania Movement for instance, has branches in four African countries and two branches in USA, and two in Europe. Over a decade ago, some British and Americans came to Ghana to be trained as priests and priestesses of the religion.

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<sup>34</sup>Samuel Gyanfosu, 'The development of Christian-related independent religious movements in Ghana with special reference to the Afrikania Movement' PhD. Diss. University of Leeds, UK, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> T. C. McCaskie, "Akwantifi - 'In Mid-Journey': An Asante Shrine today and its Clients", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38 (2008), 74-80.

MaCaskie sees the *Akwantemfi Gyeabour* Shrine among the Asante to be 'at the forefront of an internationalisation of Asante beliefs.'<sup>36</sup> The *Afrikanian Handbook* also says about the movement thus: '[I]t is Africa's religion of today's generation, but it is open to all, irrespective of race, creed, colour or ideological orientation'<sup>37</sup>. One important result of this is the formation of the *Asomdwee Fie*, Shrine of the *Abosom* and *Nsamanfo*, International (AFSANI). This is a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) based in Washington DC, USA whose major aim is to promote the practice of African Religion in Akan *Akom* (spirit possession) tradition. AFSANI is in constant touch with some shrines of African Traditional Religion in Ghana where some of their *akomfo* (priests and priestesses) are trained. For instance, *Okomfo* Akosua of AFSANI received her training and ordination at the Nana Asuo Gyebi shrine in Ghana in June 2003. This indicates the level of transformation of African Traditional Religion in Ghana today.<sup>38</sup>

Another remarkable observation of the NRMs is their attempt to be overly syncretic. Member of the *Akwantemfi Gyeabour* shrine sing songs that are a parody of Christian songs in Ghana and in one of the rooms of the shrine that serves as a place that clients consult the priest are Islamic prayer beads. The Afrikania Creed like the Godian Creed is a mimic of the Christian Apostles' Creed.<sup>39</sup> These traces of Christianity in terms of the liturgy of the Afrikania Movement perhaps stems from the fact that the leader and founder was a Catholic priest for over twenty-five years. This confirms the theory that no single spirituality can claim to be independent of elements of other spiritualities. Syncretism, the borrowing and mixing of other religious ideas have been associated with religions in Africa. It has been used to describe the nature of the religious space in Africa with particular mention of the indigenous religion.<sup>40</sup> We shall provide evidence that it is not an adequate theory for the African situation.

Apart from the above, African Traditional Religion is adjusting fast to reflect the situation on the ground. For instance,

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<sup>36</sup>McCaskie, "Akwantifi", 74-80.

<sup>37</sup>Osofo Komfo Damoah, *Afrikanian Handbook* (Accra: Afrikanian Mission, 1983).

<sup>38</sup>See the details of the activities of AFSANI. 'Asomdwee Fie, Shrine of the *Abosomfo* and *Nsamanfo* International'. <http://www.afsani.org/membership.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> See the Afrikania belief system at <http://afrikania.tripod.com/id5.htm>.

<sup>40</sup>J. D. Y. Peel, 'Syncretism and Religious Change' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Jan., 1968), pp. 121-141. Daniel Kasomo, 'An Assessment of Religious Syncretism. A Case Study in Africa' *International Journal of Applied Sociology*, 2012; 2(3): 10-15 doi: 10.5923/j.ijas.20120203.01

unlike in the past, where leadership in priesthood --*akomfohene* (chief priest), was the preserve of the male priests in the various traditional communities in Ghana, today, a priestess (a female priest) can serve as *akomfohene*. One can cite the case in the Edina traditional area of the Central region of Ghana.<sup>41</sup> This may be said to be a positive response to the gender balance advocacy that is blowing across Ghana now.

Currently, one will find that some shrines in Ghana are incorporating modern technology into their activities. Nana Kwaku Bonsam of *Kofi Kofi* shrine fame of Akomadan in the Ashanti region of Ghana for instance, has a website<sup>42</sup> to sell his religion to the world. He is even on Facebook and at times, embarks on European and American tours.<sup>43</sup> Some of the traditional African priests go on some of the numerous Frequency Modulation (FM) stations in Ghana to explain their theology to others across the country contrary to the belief that African Traditional Religion is tribally based. Obviously, this has been a major point of departure of the Neo-African Traditional Religion from the orthodox form of the religion.

In spite of these attempts to respond to contemporary realities, the NRMs in the religion face some challenges. They are yet to gain popular acceptance. It is true that there is public visibility of their activities but they suffer the same fate as their orthodox counterparts. Visit to these groups is still done under secrecy. Though people who go to these movements are from diverse religions only a few would publicly accept of being devotees of the new shrines and members of the NRMs. The problem of 'political incorrectness' discussed above still bedevils the contemporary manifestations of the religion.

## **African Traditional Religion and the Religious Market**

The theory of the market simply says that for an organisation to remain competitive, it must regularly and sustainably identify the needs and desires of its customers, design products to satisfy the

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<sup>41</sup>A personal communication with the current *akomfohene* of Edina Traditional Area, 20 January 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Kwaku Bonsam's website [www.kwakubonsam.com](http://www.kwakubonsam.com).

<sup>43</sup> Watch Kwaku Bonsam Youtube on his Amsterdam tour. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGE7CqtNqdg&feature=related>. An evidence to show Ghanaians outside Ghana's interest in the religion today.

need and thereby keep the customers satisfied. <sup>44</sup> In doing these, the organisation must also have knowledge of the activities of other competitors in the market so as to package its products and promote them effectively. The theory of the market is not new in the religious discourse. Adam Smith is quoted to have said that 'self-interest motivates clergy just as it does secular producers; that market forces constrain churches just as they constrain secular firms; and that the benefits of competition, the burdens of monopoly, and the hazards of government regulation are as real for religion as for any other sector of the economy'.<sup>45</sup> It has also been used to study the expression of the religion of the Yoruba of Nigeria in the USA and Nigeria. <sup>46</sup>

The religious market in Ghana is not a metaphorical one but it exists in reality with various religions such as Islam, Christianity (of various theological shapes), Hinduism, Buddhism and the indigenous religion as active players. <sup>47</sup> A quick survey of the market reveals that the various religions are service providers in the following products. They include wife and child seeking, employment, remedy to sleeplessness caused by stress, visa to travel to mostly USA and Europe, success in trading activities, knowing the outcome of a venture and protection against evil spirits whose reality in the life of the African is never in doubt. Christianity has even accentuated the strong belief in evil spirits as Meyer's study of the Ewe of Ghana indicates. <sup>48</sup> Within Christianity the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements are the most active of the players <sup>49</sup> and on the part of Islam, clerics called *mallams* are the service providers. The Charismatic Movements highly depend on

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<sup>44</sup> Philip Kotler, *et al. Principles of Marketing*. 12th ed. (Pearson Education International, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Gruber, *Religious Market Structure, Religious Participation, and Outcomes: Is Religion Good for you?* (Cambridge: MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005), 5.

<sup>46</sup> K. O'Connor & Toyin Falola. 'Religious Entrepreneurship and the Informal Economic Sector: "Orisa" Worship as 'Service Provider' in Nigeria and the United States' *Paideuma*, 45 (1999), 115-136.

<sup>47</sup> Elom Dovlo, 'Religious pluralism and Christian attitudes,' *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology* 1 (1991.), 40- 52.

<sup>48</sup> Birgit Meyer, "If you are a devil, you are a witch and, if you are a witch, you are a devil": The Integration of 'Pagan' Ideas into the Conceptual Universe of Ewe Christians in Southeastern Ghana", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22, 2 (1992), 98-132.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Gifford, *Ghana's new Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); E. K. Anim, "Who wants to be a millionaire? An analysis of prosperity teaching in the charismatic ministries (Churches) in Ghana and its wider impact". PhD Thesis, Open University, United Kingdom, 2003.



the media to maintain their visibility in the market and promote their services.<sup>50</sup> It is within this context that the orthodox indigenous religion participates in the market.

While the prime motive of the competitors is to edge out African Traditional Religion, however, competition, as noted by Adam Smith, offers benefits.<sup>51</sup> It is making the religion to dig deep into its resources while utilizing available opportunities in the form of evangelization and the mass media to have public visibility and advertise the services it offers as we have pointed out above. In the first place, the products are not new to the indigenous religion. For centuries, it has been addressing these concerns of Africans and they included success in wars. The ancient titular deities had the monopoly of providing these services. Unfortunately, their public visibility is on the decline because of the nature of ownership. The ancient titular deities are owned by the entire communities where they are found. All those deities the paper has mentioned as not having ritual attendants are those owned by the public. This public ownership does not allow innovation because it will need the approval of the community, especially the chief of the community. The bureaucratic nature of decision as pertains in public institutions across Africa affects the communally owned deities. The idea is that public properties belong to *no-one* and, therefore, are not well catered for. Moreover, profit from public enterprises goes to the common kitty while in the case of the private enterprises, individuals have personal stake as Adam Smith noted private desires motivates the clergy.<sup>52</sup>

It is these 'private desires' that have motivated the emergence of new deities to take the place of the ancient titular ones. Some of them are not new but they have been appropriated by individual priests. The new deities are privately owned by individuals. It is the owners of these deities who are taking the 'fight' to Christians and Muslims. Among them are *Akwantemfi Gyeabour Shrine* mentioned above, *Kofi oo Kofi* shrine of Nana Kwaku Bonsam fame, Nana Oboa Nnipa, Nana Ababio.<sup>53</sup> One

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<sup>50</sup>Rosalind Hackett, 'Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of the Media Technologies in Ghana and Nigeria', *Religion in Africa* 28, 3 (1998), 258-277; J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, *Anointing through the Screen: Neo-Pentecostalism and Televised Christianity in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

<sup>51</sup>Laurence Iannaccone, "Introduction to the Economics of Religion", *Journal of Economic Literature*, 36(1998), 1465-1496.

<sup>52</sup>Iannaccone, "Introduction".

<sup>53</sup>Stephen D. Yankey, 'Modern Day Juju-man' *Ghanaweb.com* <  
<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=210787>>  
2011

strategy used in their missionary efforts is the provision of educational and social amenities.<sup>54</sup> They also increase their public visibility through the use of billboards and the radio to advertise the services they provide to attract clients. Some of them do radio evangelism as has been noted earlier on. Thus, unlike the communal gods who are characterised by conservatism and apathy, the private gods are characterised by dynamism and self-interest.

It is this self-interest that is at the heart of their participation in the religious market in Ghana. The religious market operates like any commodity market responding to demand and supply. Like any entrepreneur with profit as the motive, the market must continuously be studied to respond to it. Thus, though the products are not new to the ancient titular deities their priests have not packaged their services for a religiously pluralistic society and the seemingly apathy of their priesthood is alienating them from modern Ghanaian society. An exception is *Bonsam*, an ancient deity of the people of Techiman in the Brong-Ahafo Region of Ghana<sup>55</sup>, who has been appropriated by its current priest, Nana Kwaku Bonsam. The appropriation is making him to bring market oriented innovation of evangelism and advertising while continuing the indigenous practices such as divination, sacrifice and libation. Thus, while remaining indigenous; the shrine is also in tune with current realities in the religious market.

## African Traditional Religion and Transnationalism

This survey of the contemporary fortunes of the indigenous religion of the African will not be complete without a comment on transnationalism. It is noted that many migrant communities use religion as way of maintaining identity.<sup>56</sup> Among the new-African Diaspora, Pentecostal and Charismatic and to some extent African

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<sup>54</sup> Ghana News Agency, 'Bonsam Constructs Orphanage' Ghanaweb.com 16 June 2009 <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/regional/artikel.php?ID=163777>.

<sup>55</sup> D. M. Warren & K. O. Brempong, *Ghanaian Oral Histories: The Religious Shrines of Techiman Traditional State*. Papers in Anthropology, No. 8 (Iowa State University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 1988).

<sup>56</sup> Peter van der Veer, "Transnational Religion". Working Paper Transnational Communities Programme. WPTC-01-08 and N. J. Wellmeier, "Santa Eulalia's People in Exile: Maya Religion, Culture, and Identity in Los Angeles." In *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*. Ed. R. S. Warner and J. Wittner, pp. 97-123, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).

Indigenous or Independent Churches (AICs) are at the forefront.<sup>57</sup> But it is equally true religion creates a sense of security among migrant communities. A current study suggests strongly that the means of negotiating the process of migration has a corresponding implication on the role religion plays in the life of migrants.<sup>58</sup> The study also avers that a third theatre is emerging on transnational religious studies, that is the use of religion by would be migrants in acquisition of visa and mediating access to the country of destination. It is within these three contexts that we examine African Traditional Religion emergence as a transnational religion.

The search for security is a major concern for Africans because the threat to security is very real in the lives of the African. The African search for security against malevolent spirits such as witches and sorcerers who are always on the prowl for victims is taken seriously among the people. This threat to personal security and the security of properties is not limited to Africa since it is now borderless. The threat could come from enemies from the family who are in the diaspora or those who operate from Africa. These enemies do frustrate would be migrants in visa acquisition to, especially Europe, the Americas and recently South Korea, Japan and China. The threat of enemies continues in the life of migrants. They frustrate migrants from getting employment; they cause migrants to be deported to their home countries and sometimes when migrants come home for holidays these same enemies can frustrate their return to their land of sojourning.

Among the shrines in Ghana providing this service of security are Kwaku Bonsam of the Kofi oo Kofi Shrine and Nana Agradaa of Sowutuom in Accra. These have gained national popularity but there are local shrines too consulted by migrants when they come home or through proxies in Ghana. In Ashanti Region of Ghana, Okomfo Ama Bea of Agona Asaman and Nana Durowaa of Kumasi Bomso Fofie Shrine. Alhaji Nana Abass of Akwantifi Gyeabour Shrine at Medoma (near Kumasi) also provides service in the area of pre- and post-migration services. In a communication with him he claims that he is often invited to and hosted by Ghanaians in the US where he performs various rituals to assist them in various ways including protecting them against all

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<sup>57</sup> Afe Adogame & James V. Spikard, eds. *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora* (Leiden 7 Boston: Brill, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Ebenezer Obadare & Wade Adebunwi, "The Visa God: Would-be Migrants and the instrumentalization of religion" Adogame & Spickard, *Transnational Religious*, 30-48.

kind of evils and especially against repatriation to Ghana. In the US, he is also consulted by African-American for spiritual assistance. Okomfo Agradaa and Kwaku Bonsam sometimes show on public television their activities among the African Diaspora in Europe and the US. Day-in and day-out on Ghanaian radio stations and televisions, the public is inundated with claims by various spiritualist of various religions including the indigenous religion of their ability to help clients to acquire visa to travel for economic migration. As noted by Obadare and Adebaniwi the relationship so established in post-migration continues in the period of immigration. The priests and priestesses also claim that many Ghanaians not necessarily those they have previously assisted consult them when they visit Europe and the US.

Within the context of transnationalism, is a new phenomenon that is increasing the global visibility of the indigenous religion of the African. This is internet fraud popularly known in Ghana as *sakawa*. The modus operandi of the perpetrators of this crime is to send email to their prospective victims. In the email, they claim to have a deceased relative who had left a fortune locked up in a bank. They suggest that they would like to move the money to the victims' account and pay him or her a percentage of the money for helping in laundering the money. Sometimes, males posed as females and advertise beautiful pictures of ladies on social websites. Victims who show interest in them are told many stories with the intention of making them to part sums of money to them. Sometimes, they invite the victims to Ghana and rob them of their money.

There is a strong perception that the perpetrators of the crime utilise the service of some medicine men and priests of the indigenous religion and spiritualists from other religions including Islam to be successful in their trade. This perception is captured in several Ghanaian movies where as part of the ritual to be successful, clients of the medicine men are made to carry or sleep in coffins, offer parts of the body as sacrifice or even kill human being for ritual. Grave digging is also associated with *sakawa* because it is believed that bones of the dead are used for the *sakawa* ritual. *Sakawa* business is bringing out one contemporary manifestation of Ghanaian religious expression. The power of the religion is not limited to a locality any longer. The *sakawa* ritual is done locally but through cyberspace, its effects is far outreaching. Through the ritual, it is believed the victims in every part of the globe could be hypnotised to part with large sums of money. Cyberspace is

offering an avenue for an expression of the indigenous religion of the Ghanaian for both good and bad purpose. Though sakawa is in a bad taste, it brings out the transnational nature the religion is assuming thanks to technological advancement.

## **Syncretism, Religious Field and Market Theory**

The use of syncretism as noted above to explain the African religious space is over simplification as the religious space is very complex. One cannot run away from the fact that individually Africans make use of more than one religious idea and practice. Also, as pointed out in the case of the NRMs in the indigenous religion, there are observable attempts by them to be eclectic and syncretic. Syncretism is used within the context of religion. The motive is a psychological feeling on the part of the religious person to add on to what exists in his or her original religion because of certain imagined inadequacies.

A close observation of the religious space in Ghana which we used for our case study reveals that the motive for adding on is not because of psychological inadequacies in the traditional religion. The motive is rather to have an edge in the religious field or at the market place. The religious field is very competitive. The borrowing of religious ideas and practices is a marketing strategy with the purpose of either being at par with competitors or to have an advantage over competitors. It is not for religious purpose but for marketing or competitive purpose. It is a diversity strategy. Diversity marketing is a way of appealing to clients from diverse background. The varying background could be informed by religion, philosophy, worldview and ethnicity. The current manifestations of the traditional religion are in the hands of individuals who can innovate as the communally owned old shrines are not susceptible to innovation. The question therefore confronting them is how to make the old religion appealing to a society which is increasingly becoming heterogeneous in the context of religion beliefs? Religious diversity demands diversity marketing. Alhaji Nana Abbas is an obvious example. Al-hajj is a title conferred on a Muslim who has returned successfully after the hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. 'Nana' though generally used as a title for elderly people among the Akan is also used as deference for people who occupy certain positions in society. These people include chiefs, queens, priests and priestesses. Thus, Abbas

being a traditional priest, is qualified to be called 'Nana'. His name Abbas has an obvious Arabic origin. The name and titles of this traditional priest point to market diversification. Not surprising, he retains Islamic prayer beads and has the main object of worship in Nichiren Shu Buddhism of Japan, the *gohonzon*, as some of the religious items in the shrine.<sup>59</sup> Medoma, a suburb of Kumasi where his shrine is situated is close to some suburbs inhabited by Muslims and indeed the many times we visited the shrine, we met many Muslim women. The name Alhaji Nana Abbas boldly written on the sign board leading to his shrine is a communicating strategy meant to appeal to people from religiously diverse background. The presence of symbols from diverse religious backgrounds in the shrine enforces this communication. Our contention is that a diverse competitive religious field needs an innovative marketing strategy. Thus, syncretism as a theory overlooks the complex nature of the religious field and hence inadequate. Consequently we propose other theories: market and religious field theories to understand the place of the indigenous religion of the African in the contemporary religious space.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussions have noted that formidable factors are threatening the very survival of African Traditional Religion but the resilient nature of the spirituality of the African is not in doubt. The reason is that religious pluralism does not only offer challenges, it also offers opportunities. In Ghana the opportunities that religious pluralism offers to the indigenous religion include the attempt to be a missionary and universal religion. Religious pluralism has created a religious market. Though, the existence of the market has broken the monopoly that the indigenous religion used to enjoy in the provision of religious 'goods' to its clientele, the competition has opened some opportunities for the religion. It is adopting some of the strategies the competitors are using such as public advertisement of its products and re-packaging them to meet the demands of today's society. These are making the indigenous religion to assume a missionary posture. This posture, furthermore, is making it possible for the gradual exportation of the religion outside the shores of Africa and making the religion to

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<sup>59</sup>Yaw S. Agyemang, 'Religion and governance: A study of Asante religious institutions in governance.' (Doctorial thesis, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Ghana, 2009),91.

have a universal appeal. The most important development that augurs well for the survival of the religion is the ideological perpetuation of the indigenous religion in the competing religions. Religious pluralism does not only offer challenges, it also offers opportunities to all competing religions and the indigenous religion of the African is benefiting from these opportunities as evidenced in the innovations that the practitioners of African Traditional Religion have embarked on as have been pointed out in the discussion. It is, therefore, too early in the day to sing a dirge for traditional religion in Ghana, and for that matter, Africa as a whole.