A LOOK AT COLONIALISM FROM
THE SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES
OF AFRICANS

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ABSTRACT

Colonialism has been studied from a variety of viewpoints over the years. One perspective that has not been delved into is that of a spiritual/religious one. This thesis looks at the ways in which Africans from various backgrounds processed colonialism and slavery on the spiritual/religious level. Examples of premonitions, dreams, and curses are examined, alongside an analysis of the ways in which language and cultural aspects of some African people has changed post-colonially. Additionally, auto-ethnographic elements of the author's interest and involvement in an African spirituality are present throughout the paper with hopes of bridging the gap between pre-colonial and colonial era belief systems with that of those belief systems alive within modernity.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the Africans who maintained their indigenous beliefs and practices throughout colonialism and enslavement; those that maintained their ways in Africa and those that brought their gods to the new world.
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IMPORTANCE OF THESIS

Like the overwhelming majority of African Americans, I was raised Christian; in the Black Church - non-denominational to be more particular. I can recall my mother taking certain scriptures very seriously; more seriously than some other Christians in our small Alabama town. When October came around and the inevitable jack-o-lanterns, ghosts, and witch imagery permeated our arts and crafts, I wasn’t allowed to partake. I had to take a letter from my mom to my school teachers each year stating that she’d be much more comfortable with me doing crafts and activities that didn’t involve witches and ghosts and goblins. During Halloween, we went to a church event meant to be the alternative Halloween, called “Hallelujah Night”. At the time, myself, my brother and my sister hated it. We hated not being able to partake in school activities and having to turn off all the lights in the house and act as if no one was home on Halloween night (if we opted not to go to Hallelujah Night) because we also weren’t allowed to pass out candy to those trick-or-treating. The many items that fell under than banner of “dealings with witchcraft” that I could not read, watch, partake in, or experience (or, more importantly, understand) included astrology (in the back of fashion magazines and newspapers), Harry Potter films, and even a crocodile foot I brought back with me from a school trip to New Orleans.
I recall these instances from my childhood where “staying away from witchcraft” was very pertinent. Presently, I’m on the cusp of becoming initiated into the cult of the Orisa – indigenous deities from the West African Yoruba people\(^1\). This West African spirituality came to African Americans via Cuban Americans practicing Regla de Ocha in New York City around the 50’s and 60’s. I was introduced to the spirituality while interning in the Oyotunji African Village of South Carolina and in my general studies of religion and African and African diaspora studies. I’ve always been interested in religion. Even when I considered myself a Christian, I was reading about Islam and Hinduism. During a few years in my early twenties when after I stopped associating myself with Christianity, I was still reading on minority Christian denominations, Islam more deeply, Buddhism, Jainism, as well as the Baha’i faith. When all of these religions and denominations interested me, yet I connected with none, I considered myself an agnostic leaning atheist. When I came into my Blackness, I began to want a sense of a community, and the one offered by the atheists (either in online communities or in person) was very white and very male; I came to realize that their struggles were not my struggles and my struggles where not even on their radars. My struggles were (and are) with Black people worldwide, with people of color, with the colonized, with women, with oppressed peoples regardless of their belief system (or lack thereof).

Oyotunji was mentioned in two separate classes I was taking during the Fall of 2012. I’d decided I wanted to spend my upcoming summer doing something other than staying at my parents’ home, so I decided to see if I could spend some time in this village. After contacting them through their website, I negotiated a stay during the summer of 2013 for almost two months

\(^1\) Kamari Clarke nicely words an accurate description of this process: “One of the highest forms of Yoruba ritual initiation is the marriage of a worshipper to one of the gods. This ritual process produces qualifications of priesthood into the world of orisa worshippers and marks a reconnection to the ancestors below and above the earth (Clarke 2008:292).”
and I’ve gone back a few times since then. Prior to going, one of my mentors, Dr. Maha Marouan, suggested I read *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture* before my stay. That book was a gateway to other books, films, lectures, conversations, blogs, websites, etc. My stay in the village was enlightening on multiple levels and made all of what I was learning at the time tangible, present. I felt this spirituality like something in me was yearning for it. The rituals, the ancestor veneration, and the community filled a spiritual void for me I had not realized I had.

Prior to this situation, religion was something that was a very methodical experience for me – I’d left Christianity and then considered myself an atheist for reasons I could list on paper; for quantitative, calculated reasonings; this makes sense and this does not. And while I can most certainly do that for my current beliefs, it transcends that mathematical approach. What I believe now is heavily weighted on the emotional, metaphysical. Spiritual. For me, my studies of African Americans, Africans, various indigenous peoples, the African diaspora, and various religions of the world, birthed my spirituality identity, so that now they are inseparable. This “research” feels spiritual to me in addition to being cognitive and intellectual; these analyses, this fieldwork, these studies *are* spiritual for me. It is sacred to me.

It’s important to contextualize myself within this work so as to minimize the assumptions that might arise about myself. I do have an agenda – I am not an apolitical, ahistorical writer that values objectivism above all else. While I do value objectivism on some level, it does not control my work or my research. Some of my findings, studies, or opinions are that of a subjective being who embraces it. I like to think of objectivism and subjectivism as two halves of a whole; together creating a more complete picture or understanding of a subject. My experiences and beliefs are interspersed with my work in hopes that it will enhance the understanding that is to be
gleamed from it; so that those outside of academia, outside of these spiritualities, and outside of these studied communities will be able to understand my arguments and my findings.

I seek to do this research in order to pay homage and give reverence to my ancestors – both in the literal and symbolic sense of the word. Additionally, I seek to normalize the belief systems my (our) ancestors practiced, as they still seem to carry the weight of centuries of demonization and irreverence. Christianity has been a strong-hold within the Black American community for centuries, but the time seems ripe momentarily, to begin to establish other beliefs and spiritualities as also worthy of respect and veneration.
PURPOSE OF THESIS

While there are a number of books and articles and other research media that have looked at African religions and spiritualities, I have not come across many that explored colonialism and enslavement from a purely, or largely, spiritual perspective. At times, a text or project may focus on a particular people or region, and at other times, spirituality may be the focus of only one chapter in a book about slavery, Africa, or colonialism. This is understandable, considering the subject can be too broad for one book or article, and the problem of lumping a number of people, regions, or practices together does nothing but add to the cultural erasure many African people have already been dealing with. Hopefully, this project will be an ongoing one that I lay the groundwork for with this thesis.

This thesis will focus on the spiritual perspective of various African peoples, and how they did or were likely to have processed enslavement and colonialism. Here, I pull from the available sources to gather information about spirituality from the perspectives of Africans. Some instances are historical records from the beginning eras of colonialism, other are contemporary individuals speaking of their historical knowledge or projecting on past events, beliefs, and peoples. Moreover, I also include historical narratives and research on African Americans, as our oral histories and cultural beliefs are valuable when understanding how Africans processed colonialism and enslavement. For the most part, however, this paper focuses on Africans in Africa, and their experiences and perspectives. While it would be a great addition, the African diasporic chapter in this narrative may be in later works, but it is not the focus of this
one in particular. I may speak of colonialism, at times, as an overarching term that encompasses slavery, as well as cultural erasure, dehumanization, Christianization, forced migrations and labor, European schooling, embezzlement of land and resources, etc. I am also specifically referring to European colonialism while acknowledging that Europeans were not the first to do some of the aforementioned abuses.

I pose such questions as, ‘How did various Africans spiritually process colonialism and enslavement?’; ‘How did enslavement and the transportation of enslavement fit into the cosmological/spiritual/philosophical beliefs of various African peoples?’; ‘How were Europeans regarded, and how did their phenotypes, behaviors, and presence impact how colonialism and enslavement were perceived?’; ‘What were some similarities across different African cultures?’; ‘How is memory made and what is the importance of it in these various African communities?’
CURRENT ISSUES WITH STUDYING “AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY”

From what I have learned of various African Traditions, as well as a number of non-African indigenous traditions, the concept of categorizing and labeling aspects of life seems to be more indicative of the Western experience. With any labeling of a people, a tradition, a belief, etc. from an anthropological perspective, there always entails an issue. Either the label is too obtuse, too acute, or it was a complete misunderstanding on the part of the Westerner making or narrowing a label in the first place. Furthermore, labels and concepts within the West; within the English language may have connotations that differ from the original meaning of the word. For example, a number of early scholarly work within Religious Studies and anthropology labeled the traditions of Africa, and a number of non-European peoples, as “primitive”. The words “primitive”, “ancient” or “old” may be naturally neutral, but they have come, in many instances, to be derogatory terms that underscore racism. I would like to begin this section by defining each term that could be used to describe the subject of my thesis and then going into the myriad of ways these terms have been co-opted for different agendas or movements. Finally, I’ll discuss how these terms apply to my studies and how they simultaneously are and are not applicable.

**Witchcraft** – The art of practices of a witch; sorcery; magic (Dictionary.com, n.d.); Exercising control over another person through individual protective spirits, often to his disadvantage. Witchcraft originally meant the work of a female sorceress. Sometimes the person who exercises witchcraft is a public figure, while in other
situations he may be disliked. In some societies, everyone practices witchcraft.
Witchcraft may be believed to be a disease (Winick, 1956, p.569).

**Religion** – A system of beliefs and practices, found in every culture, that formalizes the conception of the relation between man and his environment. It helps explain difficult and seemingly inexplicable events. Religion embodies the idea of a supernatural power and of personified supernatural forces. Ceremonies, rituals, and observances are used to communicate with the supernatural, with certain persons believed to have greater access. Religion organizes a group’s members in a condition of solidarity and gives a broad base to social interaction, being a symbolic statement of social order. Religion suggests a system of authority, which enables one to know what is right. It permits imagination to express itself (Winick, 1956 p.454).

**Spirituality** – 1) The quality or fact of being spiritual. 2) Incorporeal or immaterial nature. 3) Predominantly spiritual character as shown in thought, life, etc.; spiritual tendency or tone. 4) Often, spiritualities. property or revenue of the church or of an ecclesiastic in his or her official capacity (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

**Juju** – “The word juju is French in origin and it means a little doll or toy. Its application to African deities has been perpetuated by English writers. For example, P. A. Talbot in his Life in Southern Nigeria devoted three chapters to Juju among the Ibibio people and discussed the various divinities among them. How can divinities, however minor, be described as toys? Africans are not so low in intelligence as to be incapable of distinguishing between an emblem or symbol of worship and a doll or toy. Juju is, therefore, one of the misleading and
derogatory terms used by investigators out of either sheer prejudice or ignorance (Awolalu, 1975, p.1)”

**Voodoo** - noun, plural voodoos. 1) Also, Vodun. a polytheistic religion practiced chiefly by West Indians, deriving principally from African cult worship and containing elements borrowed from the Catholic religion. 2) A person who practices this religion. 3) A fetish or other object of voodoo worship. 4) A group of magical and ecstatic rites associated with voodoo. 5) (not in technical use) black magic; sorcery. Adjective: 6) Of, pertaining to, associated with, or practicing voodoo. 7) Informal. Characterized by deceptively simple, almost as if magical, solutions or ideas: voodoo economics. Verb: (used with object), voodooded, voodooing. 8) To affect by voodoo sorcery (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

**Vodun** – A Caribbean Negro religious system with elements take from African cults and Catholicism. The word, first used in the United States by Haitian Negroes, who had been brought to Louisiana in the early 19th century, is probably Dahomean. Vodun is a complex polytheistic system. The form voodoo is also found (Winick, 1956, p.560).

**Belief System** - Faith based on a series of beliefs but not formalized into a religion; also, a fixed coherent set of beliefs prevalent in a community or society (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

**Traditional** – 1) Of or relating to tradition. 2) Handed down by tradition. 3) In accordance with tradition (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

**Indigenous** – 1) Originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country; native (often followed by to): the plants indigenous to Canada; the
indigenous peoples of southern Africa. 2) Innate; inherent; natural (usually followed by to): feelings indigenous to human beings (Dictionary.com, n.d.); “… ‘indigenous,’ from the Latin, means literally being born from within, which leads to the notion of being produced or living naturally in a particular region. In other words, ‘indigenous’ refers to what, in a conventional sense, we define as home, whether that one is defined geographically, ethnically, or religiously (Olupona, 2006, p.89).”

**African Indigenous Religion (AIRs)** – “Indigenous African religions refer to the indigenous or native religious beliefs of the African people before the Christian and Islamic colonization of Africa. Indigenous African religions are by nature plural, varied, and usually informed by one’s ethnic identity, where one’s family came from in Africa (Chiorazzi, 2015, p.400).”2

**African Traditional Religion (ATRs)** – Referring, similarly to the religions and spiritualities present in the traditions of Africa. Both Olufemi Taiwo and Jacob Olupona3 hold that this term is problematic in that it has come to encompass, in many instances, Christianity and Islam, as they have been a part of some African traditions for centuries (Olupona, 2008; Olupona, 1991)4.

**Syncretism** – “…is the process through which former definitions of the sacred are combined with innovative patterns to produce a satisfying definition of the whole and an expression of core valued, which is both in line with the past and adaptive

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2 Jacob Olupona’s words in an interview with the Harvard Gazette.
3 Jacob Olupona speaks against the term in the footnotes of the introduction to *Orisa Devotion*, although a previous book he edited was entitled *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*.
4 David Westerlund, in his addition to *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, points out that the term is of a singular notion; a homogenizing term that parallels ideas from a “Christian theological perspective” (Olupona 1991; 19).
to new institutions. Santeria, Latin American Pentecostalism, and many African movements exhibit this process (Olupona, 1991, p.159). David Carrasco describes the term as “lazy” and says “…the ubiquitous and lazy category of syncretism, a term which recent HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion evaluates as ‘a term of dubious heritage and limited usefulness often employed to ascribe insincerity, confusion, or other negative qualities to a nascent religious group’(Olupona, 2004, p.133).”

Culture – All that which is non-biological and socially transmitted in a society, including artistic, social, ideological, and religious patterns of behavior, and the techniques for mastering the environment. The term culture is often used to indicate a social grouping that is smaller than a civilization but larger than an industry…The residue of social knowledge passed on through social transmission is the basic mechanism in culture which differs from the processes of biology. Culture is non-genetic. It is not learned by individual experience but socially. Culture is tradition which is handed down. Language is the most important means of social transmission…Culture is an historical process, with any culture composite and hybrid and showing variations within groups (Winick, 1956, p.144-145).

Within all words in the English language, there are histories and connotations embedded within the terms. When we discuss spirituality/religion, especially when talking about non-

5 Carrasco goes on further into the problematic nature of the term: “Inga Clendinnen, in her helpful essay, “Ways to the Sacred: Resconstructing Religion in Sixteenth Century Mexico,” goes even further when she writes: ‘Syncretism is not even a teachable proposition because we are not faced with a creative mixing of divergent traditions but with the inexactability of a profoundly different way of conceptualizing the world and man’s place within it.’” The rest of his article in his addition to Olupona’s book, entitled “Jaguar Christians in the Contact Zone” goes on to further dispel the idea of the term.
Judeo-Christian traditions, it is important to remember than many of these terms are not of the choosing of those who practice or practiced these traditions. When talking about Africa specifically, many of the terms that fall under the umbrella of religion/spirituality came about during colonialism. Christian missionaries, in their bid to try to understand just enough about the indigenous belief systems, had to come up with terms for the ideas existent within these belief systems, in order to better connect with those they sought to convert. And over time, those words have come to mean different things, although rarely being accurate linguistic representations of these beliefs. For example, the word “juju” has come to mean any traditional belief in many parts of West Africa. Many Africans I personally know use the term “juju” to refer to any indigenous spiritual or religious idea or practice. The uncivilized light with which Africa was and continues to be caste has effected how the indigenous beliefs have been seen. When many of those (whose first languages are colonial ones) who try to (re)connect with traditional beliefs from Africa, they are met with terms laden with negative stereotypes and motifs. And in an effort to redefine these terms, we still are limited by our colonial languages.

For some, the constant referral to traditional/indigenous beliefs as anything other than ethnic religions, is seen as a continuation of the diminution of these beliefs. Taking a more comparative approach to show the issue within the term, Jacob Olupona and Terry Rey assert:

“Invariably the product of ‘first world’ scholars and presses, world religions textbooks often also include chapters on Jainism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism, while woefully overgeneralizing and unsoundly grouping ‘primitive’ (or ‘primal’, ‘tribal’, ‘oral’, ‘nonliterate’, or ‘basic’) religions and offering the reader slender and derivative examples thereof from anthropological accounts of particular ‘tribal customs’ of Africa (often the Yoruba), Native America, and/or South Pacific. Such a demographic and geographic imbalance has virtually kept closed the entryway into the ranks of world religions and, because it gives the false impression of the putative world religions (and, in fact, all religions) being stagnant monoliths, renders the term itself anachronistic. It is our contention that the term ‘world religion’ is only salvageable (and can only move beyond its ‘East’/’West’ centrism) through a critical rehabilitation in light of today’s global
religious landscape, and through an uprooting of the evolutionist premise of such Western typologies such as ‘high’ versus ‘low’ religions, ‘scriptural’ versus ‘primitive,’ ‘big traditions versus ‘little traditions.’ (Olupona, 2008, p. 7)”

Simply put, to not refer to traditional African beliefs as “religions” helps sustain the false dichotomy that only the East and West have produced religions worthy of scholarly assiduity. On the other hand, for many I personally know who practice the Yoruba indigenous beliefs, the term “religion” connotes an orthodoxy accompanied by a text, and a set of rules to be objectively interpreted. Spirituality was the term most used to describe what they believe, in contrast to “religion”, because it is tailored to the individual, rather than ascribing universal tenets, and because it is based on nature and tradition rather than a concrete text. In other words, “religion” comes with standards, archetypes, and a text of tenets; “spirituality” is heterodox, ephemeral, and nuanced. My use of these words also reflects this separation.

Other terms, such as “African Traditional Religion” which attempts, on some level, remove the weighty monolith within the umbrella term “Traditional Religions”, also comes with its critics:

“…At some point in our evolution as scholars, we have come across denials that hardly any religion is indigenous to Africa. These denials have motivated the proliferation of works that either refute them or try to show that even though there is religion that is indigenous to Africa, it is so different that it deserves a name all by itself: hence the appellation ‘African Traditional Religion.’ It is equivalent in religion of ‘African Traditional Thought,’ the erstwhile discredited name of African Philosophy. Such is the depth of the lack of self-confidence among African scholars that for so long they felt that African equivalents or empirical analogues of their disciplines must forever be marked by inferiority and banished to existence in the ‘traditional’ forest. The notion of ‘African Traditional Religion’ ought to be rejected, for it could only have come out of an attitude that still reels from hesitation about its own heritage. In some cases, it has served to

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6 Rosalind Shaw also points out similar issue with the term “pre-colonial”: “Focusing on colonialism alone and consigning what came before it to a homogenized ‘pre-colonial’ past replicated earlier, ahistorical studies by pushing the temporal blind spot back one hundred years or so…. But we often forget that in many parts of the world the colonial era was relatively short and was commonly preceded by other kinds of transregional connections that were not only as significant as colonialism but also shaped colonialism itself (Shaw 2002: 10).”
keep the discourse about African Religions from attaining a sophisticated philosophical level (Taiwo, 2008, p. 84-5).”

Taiwo goes on to show his contention with the term “traditional”:

“Sometimes ‘traditional’ is contrasted with ‘modern.’ Usually, the contrast involved is between ‘Traditional Religion’ and Christianity, which is adjudged ‘modern.’ But in this case, ‘modern’ is used interchangeably with ‘European.’ This is no less problematic. ... Finally, ‘traditional’ is intended to gesture toward some pristine African religion and other practiced that have not been touched by the many alien historical movements of which Africa and its peoples have been victims and, less often, beneficiaries. This covers the gamut from Islam to Christianity, European-inflected modernity to the Baha’i Movement. If such a characterization were meant to designate some unchanging or slowly but imperceptibly changing compendia of practices and attitudes, then it would be necessarily false because we have evidence that the liturgies, icons, etc., of much that is identified as ‘African Traditional Religion’ have not only changed, but their representations show that they have been importing foreign bodies and assimilating same (Taiwo, 2008, p. 85-6).”

While the “traditional” is oftentimes contrasted with the “modern”, it should be noted that many African Americans whose works focus on decolonization, have essentially switched the connotations of those terms. Whereas “traditional” meant (and means in many instances still) primitive, simple, or archaic, it now means original, pure, or authentic. The “traditional” and “indigenous” is positively elevated, contrasting with the oppression, enslavement, and dehumanization associated with modernity. Just as Taiwo says that what we view as “Traditional African Religion” has changed over time, so too have the connotations surrounding the words “traditional” and “modern” (within certain communities). With an issue I tend to agree more with, Taiwo has stated that the term “traditional”, in many instances, encompasses Christianity and Islam, as in some African contexts, they have been practices for centuries – thus making them parts of African “traditions”.

Additionally, it should be noted that there are a number of colloquial differences between words as they are used in African countries and words that are used in other parts of the world,
namely the United States. For example, when one speaks of “witchcraft” within the African American context, they are referring to largely anything that isn’t Christian. Referring back to my preface, again, that can include astrology, working with crystals, some superstitions, and almost anything having to do with indigenous spirituality. In Africa, from the sources that I have viewed, the term seems to be specifically in reference to evil, negative, and harmful acts done against another person(s). It does not seem to include things such as ancestor veneration, pouring libation, or traditional healing practices, which would be considered “witchcraft” in the African American context of the word. For example, in Jomo Kenyatta’s ground-breaking autoethnography, he speaks about the reasons for divorce in traditional Gikuyu society:

“According to the Gikuyu customary law, a husband may divorce his wife on the grounds of (1) barrenness; (2) refusal to render conjugal rights without reason; (3) practicing witchcraft; (4) being a habitual thief; (5) willful desertion; (6) continual gross misconduct (Kenyatta, 1962, p. 176-7).”

He mentions witchcraft along with stealing, desertion, and gross misconduct, suggesting that it is or includes negative deeds, ill will, and/or harmful, possibly deadly, consequences. This is also contrasted with the other aspects of Gikuyu society he details that would be considered religious or spiritual that he does not label as “witchcraft”.

It should be noted that Taiwo entitled his essay “Orisa: A Prolegomenon to a Philosophy of Yoruba Religion”. I would assume that he is suggesting that we be much more specific and

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7 Harri Englund perfectly speaks to the issues of the term in one of his notes referencing E. E. Evans-Prichard: “Although Evans-Prichard’s (1937) classic distinction between witchcraft and sorcery has no precise counterpart in Dedza, villagers do make, at least in principle or in response to an ethnographer’s questions, what might at first seem to be a parallel distinction. Ufiti, ‘witchcraft’, denotes an evil identity of particular persons, while tsenga, ‘sorcery’ refers more to the general techniques used in their evil deeds. The distinction is, however, muddling, because it appears to be impossible to use tsenga without the expertise of witches (afiti). The person performing tsenga is either a witch himself/herself or has consulted a witch. There are also a number of other concepts and idioms associated with ufiti, such as mankhvala achioka, chitaka, kutsirika and kusukulatsa, and as will be discussed below, the moral undertones of these different concepts are extremely variable. The exclusively negative connotations of the English concept ‘witchcraft’ are thus misleading. This study acknowledges the multiple moral implications witchcraft has in southern Dedza (Englund, 1996, p. 275).”
prefix the word “religion” with that of the specific ethnic group that originated the spirituality (i.e., “Yoruba Religion”, “Bambara Religion”, or “Kongo Religion”, etc.). But even that specification may not be as exact when you factor in, as he said, that what is “traditional” has changed; it has been impacted by various other religions, cultures, as well as migrations and various forms of oppression. Does the term “Yoruba Religion” speak to the syncretism that has taken place in some African contexts? In many instances within Africa, ethnic lines cannot so easily be drawn in the sand. Furthermore, what does one label the religion of Cuba? Would that be termed “Yoruba Religion,” considering a large portion of the belief system originated with the Yoruba? Or would it be called “Cuban Religion”, considering that Regla de Ocha has changed in many ways, namely its syncretism with Catholicism? The term “Yoruba religion” may also include any religion the Yoruba practice, which would include Christianity, Islam, and others.

In large part, the difficulty in linguistic specification when it comes to these belief systems has to do with the obtuse nature of the concepts themselves, even when examining the languages that birthed these spiritualities. Olufemi Taiwo quotes Ulli Beier in discussing these multi-faceted concepts:

“The relationship between the Yoruba and his orisha is essentially different from the relationship of a Christian worshipper to his God. “The Christian demand for “faith” in God has no meaning in terms of Yoruba Religion. A Yoruba never says ‘I believe’ in orisha. One can believe or disbelieve another man’s story or excuse. But in a religious context, the word cannot be used. It would in fact imply the possibility of disbelief. In Yoruba the word, igbagbo (a believer) stands contemptuously for ‘Christian’…. The relationship between a Yoruba and his orisha is expressed in the complex multivalent verb li or ni that is contained in the word olorisha. Olorisha is usually translated into English with the approximation ‘orisha worshipper,’ but strictly speaking, it could mean ‘one who has orisha,’ ‘One who is orisha,’ or ‘One who makes orisha.’ … To be orisha is an equally correct translation of the word olorisha. The worshipper offers his body as a vehicle to orisha, he allows the orisha ‘to mount his head,’ to ride him, and he strived to become for brief moments, the personification of the orisha. Only very

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8 This was mentioned by Funlayo E. Wood – a facebook friend, scholar at Harvard Divinity school, and a practitioner of Ifa/Orisa.
few and very powerful priests could really represent the orisha all the time. But every olorisha must become the orisha some time (emphasis his) (Taiwo, 2008, p. 96).”

It is clear just how language, birthed within a particular culture, is a representation of the worldviews of that culture. English, with its set of ontological perspectives, will never be able to fully and precisely translate the spiritual concepts (among other things) from an indigenous society. So on some level, expecting or attempting specificity is futile. Within this paper, the reader will see that many different terms will be used interchangeably to show that a diverse vocabulary is necessary.

Speaking of the changes that have happened to various “traditions”, it is also important to note the language with which certain spiritual traditions are understood and function within contemporary African societies. In many instances, traditional spiritualities have been demonized along with the rise of Christianity and Islam. While some practices and beliefs are syncretized with Christian and Muslim beliefs, others have bled into the arena of “culture” – a neutral term often used euphemistically to refer to spiritual aspects. Admittedly, traditionally, in many cultures, there was not a separation between religious/spiritual and what was not. These concepts bled seamlessly into one another. But with colonialism and the conversion of most Africans to Islam or Christianity, certain aspects of religious/spiritual (or cultural – whatever your perspective) needed to be neutralized; practiced with the veneer of emotional distance. Vincent Mulago, quoting Bishop Le Roy, speaks about the ambiguity of religious/spiritual terms and practices within the African context:

“Religion…in Africa, if it is involved in everything, is also confused with everything: with laws and received customs, feasts, rejoicing, mourning, work and business, events, and accidents of life. It is even difficult at times to distinguish it in practice from medicine, science, superstition, and magic. That is why there is no word to indicate religion in general; it is included under the general expression ‘customs’ – what is received from the ancestors, what has always been believed
and done, the practices which must be observed to maintain the family, the village, the tribe, and whose neglect would bring about certain misfortunes – as we have often seen. (Mulago, 1991, p.127).”

I considered exploring all the spiritual/religious terminology (i.e., witchcraft, magic, sorcery, Juju, voodoo, idolatry, heathenism, etc.), but it seems to all stem from this core issue of the ambiguity and nuance of spiritual/religious terms and practices in the traditional sense(s), as well as the complications of translating such concepts.

Another issue within studying traditional African beliefs are the authors of many sources. During the colonial and post-colonial eras, many African scholars sought to make their traditional cultures understood to larger audiences; to establish themselves as a people with a history and particular markers and characteristics. Many African scholars translated and made palatable the customs of their people, generally to a Western audience. For example, E. Bolaji Idowu – one of the most famous Yoruba religious scholars – was one of the first Yoruba to write books and articles on the topic of traditional Yoruba spirituality. One of his best sellers, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* was written in 1962 and many have noted that his depiction of Olodumare – the Yoruba high god – closely resembles Christian theological concepts of god. This isn’t completely surprising considering Idowu was a Catholic priest whose works sought to embed Christianity further into the life of Africans through a cultural quid pro quo\(^9\). While Idowu was never necessarily secretive about his agenda, he may not have made it clear to his readers and the rest of the scholarly world that his works on Yoruba traditional beliefs are also shaped by his agenda and his identity as a Christian. Similarly, many other African scholars of religion followed suit by also delving into their religious traditions while identifying as

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\(^9\) Meaning that, almost like an auction, Idowu sought to bargain certain aspects of African cultures in the face of Christianity/modernity. Become Christians and give up animal sacrifice, but keep a diluted form of ancestor veneration; Give up all the annual spiritual festivals, with the exception of one; Reject the divination of Ifa, but allow it in cases of extreme cases, etc.
Christians. While it is certainly possible for a Christian to produce an objective ethnography on a people, it is quite clear in retrospect that many of these African Christian scholars did not achieve that. With the centuries of colonialism and Christian indoctrination, some Africans felt the need to show the many similarities between their traditional beliefs and that of Christianity – even when the similarities were few and far in between. Unfortunately, the books produced by African Christian scholars make up the large bulk of literature produced on the subject.

The heart of the issue is that while these scholars are African, and are members of their particular ethnic groups, they are not practitioners of the spiritualities their writings focus on. They may have family members or friends that practice them, but they themselves do not. Some, having been raised in the church, only have second-hand knowledge of the religious traditions they speak of. Yet, on a global level, it is their works that represent their cultural and religious traditions. And while this may seem like the common debate within anthropology about the insider and outsider (emic and etic) perspectives, I would also argue that African scholars of African traditions might be a bit more biased than a Westerner studying an African people. The African Christian scholar may, on a conscious or subconscious level, be looking to redeem his or her people; to undo all the negativity that has come to their people as a result of colonialism and the negative depictions from Christian missionaries speaking of African spiritualities as the religion (or no religion at all) of the “uncivilized”. Contemporarily, there are some that tie the lack of development, amongst other issues, that Africa as a continent experienced and is still experiencing as a result of the “backwardness” of African spirituality, which many Africans still hold onto. And when the wars, poverty, forced migrations, enslavement, and other calamities are excused in some minds, if not justified, then it would seem logical for African Christian scholars to re-write their histories with a Christian tone. While making African spiritualities acceptable or
tolerable to the Christian/Western disposition in order to re-humanize African peoples is commendable on one level, it also speaks, unfortunately, to the internalization of that colonial dehumanization on another. Still, the point remains that the voice of the “insider” should make up the bulk of the literature. While speaking about the separation between the Western scholar and the African scholar, David Westerlund also speaks to the issues of the general insider/outsider dilemma:

“In my opinion, the striving for the ‘inside view’ should, continuously, be given the highest priority in the humanistic, scholarly study of African and other religions. Thus, the aim should be, as it were, to ‘Africanize’ African religions. However, since we cannot fully escape our position as ‘outsiders’ or ‘reductionists,’ we should declare openly our own worldviews and interests (Westerlund, 1991, p.23).”
SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

In this quest to understand and analyze how various Africans perceived colonialism, the Middle Passage, and enslavement, I think it’s important to look from a somewhat chronological perspective. Firstly, were there any predictions of the incoming situations? Geomancy, in its varied forms, is quite a common feature of nearly all African societies. One has to wonder whether any of these divination systems predicted the coming of whites, enslavement, Christianity, or any of the other ill that have resulted from colonialism. This will not only inform us on some aspects of the spiritual context within which this prediction was birthed in, but also some of the ways that whites may have been perceived when they first encountered different African peoples. Secondly, how were the Europeans received; how did their presence, phenotype, and behaviors fit into the existential worldview of various African peoples? This also tells us something about the cosmological and philosophical stages on which colonialism and enslavement were set. And lastly, is it possible to look at the ways African languages have changed over time in order to see how they comprehended colonialism and enslavement? And how can we then piece this knowledge together with information from enslaved Africans in the Americas in order to get the best understanding of colonialism and enslavement from various traditional African spiritual perspectives? Analyzing these instances along with the different spiritualities/religious beliefs, I hope to get closer to discerning some of the spiritual understandings of what ensued during and prior to colonialism.
It is popular knowledge within African American communities that dreaming of fish implies pregnancy – usually of someone close to you. At least two of my aunts, and a close family friend dreamed of fish when my sister was pregnant with her first child. When it is mentioned, no reference of it relating to something outside Christianity is implied – it simply is; almost in a neutral, areligious territory. I’m sure though, that if it were related to West African fertility/motherhood deities, who are almost always related to some body of water (and thus, fish), it would be condemned as un-Christian. Yemoja\textsuperscript{10}, whose name translates to “Yeye-omo-eja” or “mother of fishes”, is the Yoruba goddess that is also prominent in various New World religions. Strongly associated with water, fish, fertility, and motherhood, it is possible that there is a connection between this West African goddess and the African American linkage whereby fish and pregnancy are linked within dreams.

Dreams have been known to predict many things for African Americans, all while existing outside the reasonings of Christianity (Shafton, 2003). Assata Shakur references her grandmother’s dreams – which predicted her escape from prison – in her autobiography (Shakur, 1987). Similarly, one of the only examples I know of that speaks of a prediction of encountering Europeans – via a “dream”\textsuperscript{11} – is from one of the first autoethnographies – *Facing Mt. Kenya* by Jomo Kenyatta. In the introduction to his section on traditional Gikuyu thoughts on land, he speaks about the coming of the Europeans and the predictions that foretold their presence.

> “Once upon a time there lived in Gikuyuland a great medicine man known as Mogo or Moro wa Kebiro. His national duty was to foretell future events and to advise the nation how to prepare for what was in store. We are told that one early morning the prophet woke up trembling and unable to speak; his body covered

\textsuperscript{10} Known in Regla de Ocha/Santeria as Yemaya, and in Candomble as Yemanja. Also see references to Osun and Mami Wata.

\textsuperscript{11} I am assuming this is what he means when he say “during his sleep Ngai (God) had taken him away to an unknown land”. This could mean a number of things, but perhaps for simplicity’s sake, I will refer to it as a “dream”. But it is important to note that he may have been referring to actual physical trip, as the excerpt states that his body was “covered in bruises”.

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with bruises. His wives on seeing him were very frightened and in a state of hysteric, not knowing what had happened to their husband, who went to bed in perfect health the previous evening. Horror-stricken, the family summoned the ceremonial elders to his side with a view to offer a sacrifice to Ngai (God) and to inquire what the great man had foreseen that has so frightened him. When the ceremonial elders arrived, a male goat (*thenge*) was immediately slaughtered and Mogo wa Kebiro was seated on the raw skin. The senior elder among the gathering took the blood of the animal, mixed it with oil, and then this mixture was poured on the head of the great seer as an anointment. At the same time the ceremonial elders, saturated with religious beliefs, recited ritual songs as supplication to Ngai. Soon Mogo wa Kebiro regained his power of speech. with his usual prophetic voice he began to narrate what he had experienced during the previous night. He told the elders that during his sleep Ngai (God) had taken him away to an unknown land. There the Ngai had revealed to him what would happen to the Gikuyu people in the near future. On hearing this he was horrified, and in his endeavour to persuade Ngai to avert the evil events coming to the Gikuyu, he was badly bruised and exhausted and could not do anything but obey the Ngai’s command to come back and tell the people what would happen. After a little pause, Mogo wa Kebiro continued his prophetic narrative. In a low and sad voice he said that strangers would come to Gikuyuland from out of the big water, the colour of their body would resemble that of a small light-coloured frog (*kiengere*) which lives in water, their dress would resemble the wings of butterflies; that these strangers would carry magical sticks which would produce fire. That these sticks would be very much worse in killing than the poisoned arrows. The strangers, he said, would later bring an iron snake with as many legs as *monyongoro* (centipede), that this iron snake would spit fires and would stretch from the big water in the east to another big water in the west of the Gikuyu country. Further, he said that a big famine would come and this would be the sign to show that the strangers with their iron snake were near at hand. He went on to say that when this came to pass the Gikuyu, as well as their neighbours, would suffer greatly. That the nations would mingle with a merciless attitude towards each other, and the result would seem as though they were eating one another. He also said that sons and daughters would abuse their parents in a way unknown hitherto by the Gikuyu. Mogo wa Kebiro urged the people not to take arms against the coming strangers, that the result of such actions would be annihilation of the tribe, because the strangers would be able to kill the people from a far distance with their magical sticks which spit deadly fires. … The great medicine man advised the people that when these strangers arrived it would be the best policy to treat them with courtesy mingled with suspicion, and above all to be careful not to bring them too close to their homesteads, for these strangers are full of evil deeds and would not hesitate to covet the Gikuyu homeland and in the end would want to take everything from the Gikuyu (Kenyatta, 1962, p. 41-3)”.
Kenyatta goes on to explain that when the Europeans came to their land, that they were regarded with suspicion, but a more pressing pity; pity of someone who had wandered away from home, but whom eventually wants to return back to where they came from. Disregarding the recommendations from Mogo wa Kebiro (to avoid bringing Europeans close to their homesteads), the Gikuyu allowed Europeans to set up camp and eventually lost the rights to their land (Kenyatta, 1962).

I think it’s safe to say that regardless of their prior spiritual predictions and beliefs about Europeans, the Gikuyu (and many others, we can surmise) welcomed them as they would have any other stranger. Their spirituality should have laid the groundwork for keeping Europeans at a distance, but in the end, it did not. Is it possible that there are other aspects to their spirituality and/or society (e.g., beliefs on welcoming strangers or some or some sense of the “golden rule”) that overrode the negative associations they should have had of whites?

On one level (which seems to be the case in almost all religions and spiritualties), there are the norms, beliefs, and protocols of a religion/spirituality that fall in line with that society. On another level are the literal actions of individuals, that don’t always follow traditional protocols, for whatever reason. There are a number of things that can be gathered from the excerpt above about the prediction, but what it does not explain is why the subsequent generations of Mogo wa Kebiro failed to heed his warnings. We can analyze the ways in which Africans may have received whites upon first meeting them, but what actually took place is another matter.

While dreams are held in a neutral spiritual territory for African Americans, curses (not conducted by the Christian god, I suppose) are undeniably categorized as “witchcraft”. Like (the interpretation of) dreams, curses can tell us a number of things about a spirituality or worldview. Another example of something similar to a prediction involves the ancient empire of Oyo,
located in present-day Nigeria, in which the rejected king cursed the Yoruba people to be scattered across the globe. Utilizing *History of the Yorubas* by Samuel Johnson (Johnson, 1969), Dr. Kamari Clarke looks at one of the first written accounts of the downfall of an ancient Oyo king in her book *Mapping Yoruba Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities*.

“In the passage that follows, Johnson represents the death of Kakanfo Oyabi as the beginning of the end of Oyo governance. Explaining that the Oyo Empire was under siege by insubordinate forces, he states: ‘Several weeks passed and they were still encamped before Oyo irresolute as to what they should do next. At last an empty covered calabash was sent to the King — for his head! A plain indication that he was rejected. He has suspected this all along and was not unprepared for it. There being no alternative, His Majesty set his house in order; but before he committed suicide, he stepped out on the palace quadrangle with face stern and resolute, carrying in his hands an earthenware dish and three arrows. He shot one to the North, one to the South, and one to the West uttering those ever-memorable imprecations ’My curse be on yea for your disloyalty and disobedience, so let your children disobey you. If you send them on an errand, let them never return to bring you word again. To all the points I shot my arrows will yea be carried as slaves. My curse will carry you to the sea and beyond the seas, slaves will rule over you, and you, their masters will become slaves’ (Clarke, 2004, p.180).’”

In order for this instance to fit within the confines of a “prediction”, it would had to have taken place prior to the enslavement (or at least prior to the surge of enslavement) of the Yoruba people’s enslavement. King Aole’s curse was done in or around year 1796, when the demise of the Oyo Empire was beginning (Clarke, 2004, p.179). Michael Gomez predicts that 10,000 Africans were being taken to the New World annually beginning in 1650 and declining in rate around 1840 (Gomez, 1998, p.18). So by the time of this curse, the slave trade had been taking place for over a century. But within the larger scheme of spiritual symbolism and relevance, for some, the curse was still a prediction that actually came to fruition with the large-scale enslavement of the Yoruba people. The people of the Oyotunji African Village — whose name in
Yoruba translates to “Oyo rises again” – relate their existence and presence in U.S. as related to this particular curse.

“Oyotunji revivalists tend to reproduce this past as their won using the textual words from Samuel Johnson’s (1921) *History of the Yorubas*. It’s narratives of origins, demise, and dispersal serve to legitimize their linkage to Oyo royalty and to explain their condition outside of Africa (Clarke, 2004, p.178).12

The influence of the Yoruba is probably the most visible and evident from the variety of amalgamated cultures in the New World (see also: Clarke 2004; Gomez 1998; Olupona 2008; Brown 2003; Matory 2005). While it has been argued that the Yoruba people were not the most exported West African ethnic group, their numbers were enough (or more consistent over time) to see their cultural mark centuries later and in various parts of the Americas (Mintz, 1992). While it is unclear how the people responded during or after the time that this curse was spoken and enacted, it certainly seems to have been in the oral history of the people of Yorubaland in order for Samuel Johnson to hear it, almost a century after it took place (Clarke, 2004, p.178). So it is likely that at least some of those enslaved that were taken to the Americas knew of this curse. Thus, I would question whether or not the Africans enslaved from and around Yorubaland saw their enslavement and their transportation to the Americas as a result of a curse. Was enslavement something that they accepted in the way one would a punishment that they believed they deserved? And perhaps for a later project, did these sentiments (of enslavement being a curse) translate over during conversion into the Christian cosmology?; Did some negative views of our indigenous beliefs arise from the fact that our enslavement may be due in part to a curse initiated from these beliefs and practices?

12 Dr. Kamari Clarke was one the second anthropologist to live in and study the people of Oyotunji. Although I didn’t complete her book until after I had left Oyotunji, her work was one of the pieces of literature that inspired me to do fieldwork in Oyotunji. In this quote and in her book, she speaks about the village in the 90’s.
In the process of trying to understand the myriad of ways in which Africans perceived colonialism, enslavement, and all the other horrors that went into those circumstances, it’s important to look at how Europeans would have initially been seen by different African societies. While some scholars have looked at these instances in order to process the beginnings of racism and various other ills of the West, I would like to look at the initial encounters from a religious/spiritual perspective. We can only speculate as to some early first encounters, but there are still some accounts and aspects in various African languages that lend us a peek at what may have been going through the minds of Africans with those initial contacts. Some of the questions that this section addresses are “How was white skin seen/understood?”; “Was there a spiritual significance for white skin or any other phenotypical features of whites?; “Were their conceptions about Europeans related to their spiritual concepts concerning albinos?; “How did these idea impact how whites were received?”


“One example of the treatment of a *simbi* child may be presented. It concerns an epileptic boy aged 10-11 years. This boy was one of the six siblings, some younger, some older. His parents were greatly respected as parents of a *simbi* child, and his mother was often consulted as a *nganga*. All the brothers and sister of the boy were quite normal in their behaviour, but the epileptic boy behaved quite differently….His parents tried to satisfy all his whims. If they did not, he punished them by starting to scream at a certain hour of the nigh. He announced to them in the daytime that, if he did not get this or that, he would start screaming at ten o’clock. And so he did. He then continued to scream or rather howl like a dog for hours, until he finally fell asleep. The whole village was thus kept awake for hours, but nobody commented on this or tried to do anything about it. This could be repeated on several nights in a week. The reason for this ‘punishment’ could be, for instance, the fact that his father had refused to walk all the way from Loubetsi to Kibangou (34 kilometres) in order to buy him a tin of sardines at six
o’clock in the evening, when the son suddenly wanted this. … In a figurative sense, he might be said to do everything the wrong way around, but he was not aggressive or mean. He just did the opposite of what he was asked to do, but with a quiet smile. Finally, a European nurse came to the village. She got into contact with him and asked him to do different jobs for her. He obeyed. She even asked him not to scream for a certain period. He obeyed. The comments that the villagers made on this were: ‘Of course, he obeys a European, since the Europeans are of the same kind as the boy. They are ba(k)isi who have come back to earth, and the nurse is thus the master of the boy’ (Jacobson-Widdings, 1979, p.81-2).”

This is an example where Europeans are placed within the cosmology and spiritual worldview of those of the Lower Congo. They are associated strongly with, if not seen as actual, albinos.

“Twins, albinos, dwarfs, epileptics, the malformed and idiots are all considered to have certain magic power and are treated according to rules different from those which apply to other people. They are all believed to be “children of basimbi”, that is, a certain kind of ancestral spirits that are designated by the term simbi (pl. basimbi) in Kikongo (k)isi (pl. ba(k)isi) in Kibuissi. … The simbi spirits are considered to be ‘good’, since they are sometimes generous. They may, unexpectedly, give game or other gifts, but they are at the same time somewhat unpredictable, capricious and difficult to understand (Jacobson-Widdings, 1979, p. 81).”

When the villagers commented that the young boy was “the same kind” as the European, they were obviously associating Europeans with the albinos they had long seen in their society. The “children of basimbi”, it should also be noted, were seen as capricious and misunderstood, but still morally acceptable. The capricious nature of the “children of basimbi” seems to stick out as a signifier of the confusion that resulted from enslavement. Stories of being captured by Europeans for enslavement closely paralleled the trickster tales common throughout West Africa oftentimes placed Europeans in the place of the trickster. It is possible that this capricious nature believed as personality traits of albinos, and thus whites, is how whites came to be seen.

Michael Gomez, in his book entitled Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South gives another example of a spiritual understanding of white skin that references the author above.
“Hilton’s category of the ‘named dead,’ or what Jacobson-Widdings calls the recently dead, is directly related to the third category of the nkadi mpemba or mpemba. In this instance the historical and anthropological literature, converge in that the recently dead were divided into the evil bankugu and the good banzambi bampungu. The former either dwelled in the forest or were forced to wander about homeless. The banzambi bampungu, however, lived in the land of the good spirits, mpemba, after having spent from six to ten months in the grave. Now, the thing about mpemba is that it was located beneath the ground, ‘on the other side of the water,’ where white clay is found (that is, at the bottom of rivers and lakes). During the six-to-ten-month period in the grave, the deceased are believed to change color, turning white before entering mpemba. Explained in another way, the world was conceived as resembling ‘two mountains opposed at their bases and separated by water.’ The barrier between these two sections of the world was called the kalunga, a reference to the ocean or large body of water. The dead had to pass through the kalunga to reach the other mountain, the dwelling of the recently dead, mpemba.

It does not take a leap of the imagination to identify the Atlantic Ocean with the kalunga and Europeans with ‘the returned spirits of the dead who lived at the bottom of the ocean (Gomez, 1998, p.146-7).”

Gomez then goes into how appearance alone did not qualify Europeans as the ancestors. Their behaviors were then explained in different ways.

“This, of course, would explain their color. However, it could not explain their activities, by which it became abundantly clear they were no ancestors of West Central Africans. Upon realizing this, a new twist was added to the account that did not violate Congolese or Angolan view of the afterlife but was in fact consistent with it. To account for the slaving interests of these ‘spirits,’ the notion developed that beyond the Atlantic were ‘blood red-skinned followers of the great Lord of the Dead, Mwene Puto … These people of Mwene Puto, it was well known, were cannibals who took their nourishment from the flesh of the blacks they so avidly sought.’ Mwene Puto was Portugal (and by extension, Europe). Death, the slave trade, and white people were therefore all inextricably linked, and to embrace one was to unavoidably come into contact with the other two (Gomez, 1998, p.147).”

We know that the Kongo Empire had long been in contact with the Portuguese and they were some of the first Africans to convert to Christianity (Gomez, 1998, p.141). So it is likely that they may have had some centuries during which they initially associated Europeans with ancestors reincarnated as capricious albinos to their later understanding of them as followers of a cannibalistic deity. But again, like in the case of the Gikuyu, what is believed may not
necessarily be what is acted out. The Kongo Empire had long been trading with Europeans, thus establishing some type of friendly relationship with them. The Kongo elites had also, for many centuries prior to the rest of the continent, began practicing Christianity and implementing various Christian symbols into their societal imagery. One has to question exactly when the Kongo began associating Europeans with followers of Mwene Puto, as opposed to neutral reincarnated ancestors, and what role enslavement and colonialism played in it.

There are other connections between Europeans and cannibalism, however, that are also important to consider. Rosalind Shaw, in her book on the impact of slavery on the Temne-speaking communities of Sierra Leone, probes some of these examples.

“In contrast to the gruesome particulars in reports of Mane cannibalism, nameless and faceless Europeans are simply described as eating African slaves, either on the slave ships themselves or at their distant destinations: there are no specifics of food preparation, cooking, banquets, or captives forced to eat their own kin and companions. If accounts of Mane cannibalism convey the difficulties of building affinal and other relationships with people who have conquered you and made your relatives and neighbors disappear into slave ships, the spare depictions of European cannibalism on those ships across the ocean convey the idea of predatory foreigners with whom there is little or no direct relationship. … For people living along the Atlantic coast or in the hinterland, the prospect of travel toward the coast, or the presence of the sea, of a ship, or of Europeans could elicit images of cannibalism. In his famous Narrative, for instance, Equiano describes his terror at being brought to the slave ship and, upon seeing his European captors, he asks fellow Africans ‘if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair (Shaw, 2002, p. 230).”

While the other examples are of pre-colonial beliefs, the one expressed by Rosalind Shaw speaks of the image that has come to be attached to Europeans after having experienced – either directly or indirectly – enslavement. This shows how crucial it is to understand that culture, and the spirituality that is a part of it, is ephemeral and fluid; it changes with the time. We initially see various elements in diverse African communities’ spiritualities where Europeans should have been met with aversion, at best. But, more accurately, we see (from our examples) that a warm
welcome is what many Europeans actually received. Finally, we see that the post-colonial (that more and likely began during colonialism) narrative, in our examples has shifted to an association of the European with cannibalism.

Briefly, I would like to consider the validity of the idea of cannibalism in context to colonialism and the Western world. While it has been said that Arab slave traders spread the tale that Europeans were cannibals to the Congolese in order to keep them from connecting with Europeans for the purpose of trade, it is not clear where the other African peoples required the belief (assuming that it may have been via foreign influence) (Rice, 1998). Where the Temne-speaking peoples of Sierra Leone, and the Igbo of present-day Nigeria (the ethnicity of Olaudah Equiano) obtained such an idea is unknown. I would hope that they knew, on some level, what was to befall them in this new land.

At the core of the concept of cannibalism is eating. Eating is done for the purpose of nourishment in order to acquire energy; fuel is needed to energize the body and sustain it throughout our respective lifetimes. In many ways, that is exactly what Africans have been used for in this country and various others in the new world. Slave labor has fueled this and other countries from centuries, and still does. By most accounts, an enslaved African would be lucky to reach their teenaged years. Black women’s bodies were used in the same way breeding sows are; breeding more and more Black babies to die at young ages for the benefit of white slave owners and a white supremacist nation. Black women’s bodies were also used as wet nurses for white children during slavery. The teeth of unknown individuals enslaved by George Washington were extracted to make up his dentures (Gehred, 2017). Black women’s bodies were used to build the foundation of what we know today as obstetrics and gynecology (see also

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13 We could include Africans in Africa into this equation, but I would like to focus on the concept that those being enslaved and taken on slave ships were going to be eaten either on the ships or in the new destinations.
Washington, 2008; Sterling, 1997). Symbolically, Black art, food, language, clothing, and various other aspects to African American culture are appropriated, processed, changed, and discarded; eaten, digested, and defecated. Fittingly, bell hooks refers to the process of symbolically consuming the cultures of those labeled the ‘Other’ in the West as “eating the other” (hooks, 1997). The examples can go on ad nauseum, but the point that our bodies have been the wood for this Western fire has been made.

One of the box office hits of 2017 has been the horror film entitled ‘Get Out’, directed by Jordan Peele. It centers on a young Black man in a romantic relationship with a white woman. Upon going to her house to meet her parents for the first time, he eventually realizes that his “girlfriend” has brought him home in a larger scheme whereby her family and others take the bodies of young Black people to be used as hosts for the minds of dying or invalid white people. The real horror of the film, unlike many others in the genre, is that the parasitism is only another level to colonialism than what has already taken place in the past. Some reviews characterized the film as “out there”, when judging how realistic the events were. But from all the aforementioned examples, it certainly isn’t preposterous.

In many ways, on symbolic and literal levels, they/we were taken on slave ships and enslaved in order to be eaten, to be consumed, to have our bodies and our minds fuel the formation and maintenance of this country and all the others in the New World. The descendants of those who feared they would be cannibalized when going onto slave ships are working themselves to death and filling the cells of prisons to be used as cheap labor. The eating of Black bodies has merely shifted from that of overt consumption (e.g., the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and legalized slavery) to that of a more obscured and veiled consumption, but Black people as
human pabulum has been a constant. So in many ways, we might characterize this idea of European cannibals as a belief as well as a premonition.

In addition to premonitions, curses, and dreams, language is also very telling when searching for and understanding African spiritual/religious perspectives. At this point in time, we know that language, like any other aspect of a society, changes over time. So while some concepts or words may have been formed at the onset of colonialism, others have formed over time. Nonetheless, they are all informative.

In *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*, Rosalind Shaw shows how Sierra Leone’s Temne-speaking communities have been effected by the slave trade and how it changed the local cultures. While they may not speak openly about it, it has certainly permeated various aspects of their lives and communities. Here, she explores the Temne term for Europeans:

> “Indeed, the Temne word for ‘Europeanness’ or ‘Western ways’ (ma-potho) designates a range of antisocial behavior – living a secluded life, exchanging abrupt greetings, not stopping to talk, not visiting others, eating large quantities of meat, and eating alone without inviting others – all of which are defining features of Europeans in Temne experience. Such qualities of seclusion, selfishness, and greed are also precisely those that characterize witches (Shaw, 2002, p. 210-1).”

On one level, we can see how experiences and relationships with Europeans has left a bitter taste in the mouths of Sierra Leoneans, as well as an even more significant mark on their language. And on another interesting level, we can see that the Temne-speaking communities have attached special spiritual value on Europeans just as the Kongoles have. In the Kongoles case, Europeans were associated with/seen as albinos, who hold a particular spiritual status in the society. Similarly, those in Temne-speaking communities have correlated many of the behaviors of Europeans with witches, or vice versa. Whether associating Europeans with spiritually meaningful albinos, followers of a cannibalistic deity, or witches, various African peoples have
held some significance to whiteness and Europeans in their initial and in their changing spiritual beliefs.

For the founders and inhabitants of Oyotunji, where I’ve spent two summers and a few weekends here and there, whites were held at a distance (maybe more in the past than the present). The founder, HRM Oba Efuntola Oseigeman Adefunmi I, discovered the African spirituality he was looking for in the practices of the Cuban immigrants living in New York City in the 60’s. After becoming the first African American to be initiated into Regla de Ocha in Cuba, he changed many of the elements of Regla de Ocha in order to remove its syncretic Catholic elements (Clarke, 2004; Hunt, 1979; Hucks, 2014). After my first summer there, I read an article by a Ph.D. student who wrote a paper on the village and focused largely on the fact that they did not initiate nor welcome the residence of whites. I was told, while learning about ancestor veneration, not to venerate my white ancestors because bringing them together in communion with my Black ancestors could be traumatizing to the Black ancestors. While there was no spiritual significance assigned to whiteness or whites, it is said that the Oba Waja said Africans and Europeans are different in that Europeans see everything as a business; Africans see everything as a religion. And it seems as though that is the reasoning behind Europeans becoming associated with witches and followers of Mwene Puto – the traumatic and confusing experiences these Africans had with Europeans was understood spiritually/religiously. Europeans are not just cruel or evil – there is another level to their behavior that has to be explained spiritually. Colonialism and slavery were so bizarre and iniquitous that only a spiritual rationale could be given to make sense to those events. The Oba Waja’s sentiments are mirrored in a quote from Absolom Vilikazi:

“Religion among African peoples is of that very texture of life; and there is a sense in which every significant act in a person’s life is an act of worship. Thus,
when a woman dished out food, she must throw the first spoonful to the ground for ancestral spirit; or when a man drinks his favorite beer, he spills some to the floor before he drinks – not to remove an impurity, but as a sort of libation to his ancestral spirits. Similarly, a man’s home is not just a dwelling, it is also a temple, wherein he worships (Desai, 1962, p. 26).”

In keeping with these sentiments, Shaw makes the point that some in the Temne-speaking communities viewed slavery as a sacrifice for Europeans. Paralleling the idea of fuel, food, nourishment for the West/Europeans, sacrifice (be that of human, non-human animal or other) is understood in a similar, but also distinct vein.

“…animal sacrifice (both in contemporary Sierra Leone and elsewhere) commonly engender beneficial and enabling transformations through the exchange of the victim’s life for blessing and benefits (or, in the case of apotropaic sacrifice, for freedom from harm) from an extra human force to whole this life is offered. The rumors that [John] Matthews\textsuperscript{14} reported depict a reversal of the position of Africans within that exchange, turning them from ritual participants into offerings. Instead of being those who benefit from a sacrifice’s generative circulations, African captives become the victims whose ritual slaughter benefits European others – a prospect so appalling as to throw many captives into ‘a state of torpid insensibility,’ Matthews tells us. What sort of boon the white man was viewed as receiving from ‘his God’ for such a sacrifice remains undisclosed (Shaw, 2002, p. 232).”

Spiritual sacrifice implies a reciprocal exchange; something given to the god/creator/ancestors for a gain on the part of the person(s) doing the sacrifice. Eating (cannibalism) offers no hint at a divine or spiritual pledge or obligation; it is simply the act of fueling one entity. Only one entity reaps benefit – i.e., the cannibal\textsuperscript{15}. Comparatively, sacrifice offers benefit to the person(s) doing the sacrifice, as well as the deity offered the sacrifice. There is a divine order, meaning, and balance that occurs when a sacrifice takes place that goes beyond the simple act of killing and eating another animal (human or non-human).

\textsuperscript{14} Shaw is referencing John Matthews’ book \textit{A Voyage to the River Sierra Leone, on the Coast of Africa: Containing an Account of the Trade and Productions of the Country, and the Civil and Religious Customs and Manners of the People: In a Series of Letters to a Friend in England} (1966).

\textsuperscript{15} Although, anthropologically speaking, it certainly has almost always been associated with some spiritual ideas. But intrinsically, it could certainly be done areligiously.
In my experience, the idea that Black people and other oppressed peoples of the West are “sacrifices” for white people and their god(s) is not uncommon in certain (African American) circles. When I stayed in Brooklyn a few years back, I would come across Black Israelites, Rastas, Nation of Islam members, and general pro-Black individuals. I have heard numerous references to the fact that Manhattan and London are both built upon mass graves (the African Burial Ground in Manhattan, and the Catacombs of London). References to the statues of Benin and other African artifacts/shrines/art/religious relics still being held in European museums is also factored into this scheme. While it may not take place in the most articulate or academic avenues, a connection has been made between the riches of the West and the slavery, mass murders, and genocides that have taken place in order for the West to be constructed and presently thrive. And while Shaw says that the “boon” white people have received “remains undisclosed”, it seems quite obvious to many African Americans (or maybe many Black people in general) that whites, Europeans, and Europe has benefitted from its colonial and enslaving past (and present).
THE CONVERSION PROCESS

In the last section, we looked at examples from the Africans that experienced different situations during colonialism and expressed themselves spiritually in one way or another. In this section, I would like to take a shift to look at some of the thoughts and commentary on Christian conversions (and/or attempts at Christian conversions). The process of conversion and attempts at conversion not only involve information about the religion (and societal norms) of those attempting to convert others, but also a great deal about those they are trying to convert. Firstly, a look at some of the fundamental differences evident within indigenous beliefs will be examined. Secondly, some of the negative consequences that have resulted from Christian conversions will be discussed as they illustrate how parts of a society work in tandem with one another – it is not simply possible to replace religion (as one would the nose or the feet on a Mr. Potato Head) with another and have society function as before. Lastly, I’ll show how, in many instances, Christianity has not taken as strong a hold on African peoples as it would like to admit; the traditions are still there, sometimes in different forms and maybe with different emphases, but still and always there.

As Absolom Vilikazi explained above, and as implied in the statements from Oba Adefunmi I, religion/spirituality is something that is intrinsic to every aspect of African peoples’ lives. This is one of the foundational differences between many traditional/indigenous belief systems and Christianity. John Mbiti, in his groundbreaking book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, delves more into this point:
“A fundamental cause which perhaps is not easily evident, is that mission Christianity has not penetrated sufficiently deep into African religiosity. We have shown how religious Africans are, and that in traditional life they do not know how to exist without religion. Mission Christianity has come to mean for many Africans simply a set of rules to be observed, promises to be expected in the next world, rhythmless hymns to be strung, rituals to be followed and a few other outward things. It is a Christianity which is locked up six days a week, meeting only two hours on Sundays and perhaps once during the week. It is a Christianity which is active in a church building. The rest of the week is empty. Africans who traditionally do not know religious vacuum, feel that they don’t get enough religion from this type of Christianity, since it does not fill up their whole life and their understanding of the universe (Mbiti, 1989, p.227-8).”

Not so surprisingly, Mbiti echoes many of the sentiments that so many African Americans know all too well. Steve Harvey joked that his grandmother lived at church and then went on to list the days of the week and the events that coincided that they were always present for: Sunday – Sunday school, regular church sermon, and church dinner, Monday – usher board meeting, Tuesday – choir rehearsal, Wednesday – Bible study, etc. While my parents weren’t at church every night of the week, the entire day of Sunday, Wednesday nights, and various other monthly or annual events (e.g., Pastor’s anniversary, Church anniversary, Mother’s day brunch, Easter Program, Black History Month Program, The Conference, Women’s/Men’s retreat, etc.) always required our presence. Indeed, Michael Gomez says that Christianity was thoroughly “Africanized” before enslaved Africans began converting en masse to the institution (Gomez, 1998). The Black Church has certainly shown itself to be of that same outlook.

Another important thing to note when looking at Christian conversions, are the concepts and ideas that European Christians failed to understand about Traditional African Religions and/or that they didn’t care to understand. Maha Marouan, in her book *Witches, Goddesses, & Angry Spirits: The Politics of Spiritual Liberations in African Diasporic Women’s Fiction*, quotes Jeffrey B. Russell in speaking about the misunderstanding of the polarities of Christianity that are/were not present in many African traditional beliefs:
“Christianity traditionally found it difficult to accept the principle of ambivalence in the deity: the Christian God was wholly good and wholly masculine, excluding both the feminine principle and the principle of evil. Repression of the principle of evil from the godhead led to the development of the concept of the Devil. Repression of the feminine principle produced a new ambivalence of idealization and contempt (Marouan, 2013, p. 94).”

In a separate chapter, Marouan details the seemingly contradictory nature of the Vodun goddess Erzulie, whose personality of being “the tragic mistress”, “the black Venus”, and the “goddess of love” highlights the duality common in many indigenous African deities (Marouan, 2013).

The idea of dichotomy seems to be prevalent throughout Christianity (and other monotheistic beliefs), whereby one should (or must) worship one and one god only. The idea of worshipping multiple gods, possibly on various levels, and in different ways was a foreign concept to European Christians. This fundamental misunderstanding seems to be at the heart of the failure of Christianity in Africa. While it is certainly possible to point to the statistics on religious worship and the numbers of church members actively filling the pews on Sundays, it is also important to look a bit deeper than numbers and shoal confessions made out of necessity rather than authenticity. Vincent Mulago makes this point plain:

“The report of the commission replied that ‘renunciation of his religion by an African is always artificial and without depth’. If Africans readily join religions imported from abroad, that does not in any way imply any split, in spirit or attitude, between their traditional religion and revealed religion. In concrete practice, the former always persists as base and foundation of any subsequent conversion (Mulago, 1991, p.128).”

For Africans, Christianity seems to be practiced largely for political or survival reasons. However, when tragedy takes place, biomedical methods lack potency, and prayer (to the Christian god) is not working fast enough, other methods, of the non-Christian sort are utilized. It seems to me that, in keeping with the traditional spirit of “shopping around” for gods, picking up
gods, letting some go, and worshipping multiple gods at the same time\textsuperscript{16}, (many) Africans have merely gained a god, with the Christian god. They have not completely abandoned their traditional gods as so many Christian missionaries and priests in African churches would have us believe. As in the case with misunderstanding the dual nature of many African deities, there also appears to be a misunderstanding of the ways in which one can worship multiple gods at the same time.

With so many fundamental differences\textsuperscript{17} in between Christianity and indigenous African belief systems, one has to wonder why the conversion to Christianity happened (even if in name alone) in the first place. In \textit{Thing Fall Apart}, Chinua Achebe introduces a character who is one of the first in their town to convert to Christianity. In many ways, she ran to the religion because she was maligned by her community for birthing twins, multiple times\textsuperscript{18}. It seems as though Achebe was suggesting that those individuals in traditional African societies whose personalities or conditions did not find solace in the modes or judgements of their society were the first to convert in that they were looking for acceptance somewhere.

Additionally, Christian missionaries seemed to have aligned Christianity with modernity – with civilization. Changes on many levels happened during colonialism for the African, and the

\textsuperscript{16} “In some African cultures, there is a considerable shopping around for efficacious and efficient gods, gods that will deliver whatever it is that their devotees desire to have, be it longevity, good health, children, wealth, or just sheer survival (Taiwo, 2008).” Oya, for example, is worshiped as an orisha in Yoruba and Yoruba-derived spiritualities. She, as well as a few others, are Nupe in origin (Olupona, 2008).

\textsuperscript{17} Although, it should be noted that some African scholars of religion have argued that there were more similarities than differences between traditional African religions and Christianity – especially that of Catholicism. E. Bolaji Idowu has certainly made the case that Olodumare resembles the Christian god in many aspects. Other African scholars have also made the claim, whereby their supreme god is promoted above the demi- or lesser gods, and a hierarchy very similar to the Christian one emerges. It is also important to note, however, that many of these scholars promoting these ideas are also Christians – many a times, having ascended to the levels of Priests and Reverends.

\textsuperscript{18} “That week they won a handful more converts. And for the first time they had a woman. Her name was Nneka, the wife of Amadi, who was a prosperous farmer. She was very heavy with child. Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians. It was a good riddance (Achebe, 1958).”

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change – the future – was seen as better and was understood within the Christian epistemology (Desai 1962; Kenyatta 1962; Olupona 1991). Presently, in my experience, many Africans from the continent feel as though Christianity is/will be the redeemer of Africa; meaning that all the ills and maladies that Africa is and has experienced are as a result of their inability to fully accept and embrace Christianity. David Ngong embodies these sentiments in his article “Stifling the Imagination: A Critique of Anthropological and Religious Normalization of Witchcraft in Africa.” The article indirectly blames traditional practitioners with the lack of development of Africa, while pointing a finger at anthropologists and religious studies scholars for “normalizing” traditional beliefs and practices (Ngong, 2012). Thus, the reason for converting to Christianity for some is likely to obtain the gains of modernity.

While across the sea and enslaved, it is important to consider the reason many Africans enslaved in the New World may have considered converting to Christianity, for it is likely that the Africans still on the continent may have been motivated by the same rationale. Michael Gomez suggests that Christianity provided an overarching explanation of suffering that was not present in most indigenous religions.

“What emerges from his [Howard Thurman] work is the perspective that for the slave, Christianity provided an explanation for large-scale suffering that could not be found in African religions. Tremendous upheaval had taken place in the lives of millions of Africans and their descendants as a consequence of enslavement, and the religions of the ancestors were unable to satisfactorily explain it. Although Sobel is accurate in stating that black folk needed to achieve a ‘new coherence’ in their worldview, the coherence was required not simply because African religions were dissipating. Even more, the sufferers has a deep-seated need to recontextualize the meaning of their lives in such a way that their past could be reconciled to their present. Christianity, for its part, offered a rationale of inhumanity and evil that was once empathetic of those who suffer and critical of those who bring suffering (Gomez, 1998, p.282).”

Was it possible that colonialism was such a traumatizing experience, that only an explanation that went beyond the local ethnic epistemologies and cosmologies could suffice? There is only
speculation, but it is clear that a wide variety of incalculable responses resulted from the horror that was/is colonialism.

As a result of some of these misunderstandings in the conversion process, there have been a number of negative consequences as a result. While colonialism and a forced or strongly coerced conversion to Christianity in general damaged certain aspects of traditional African societies, there are particular issues within the realm of religion/spirituality that allowed for significant negative adjustments. Because while it is certainly possible for one to convert to Christianity while ceasing to believe in their former beliefs, it seems as though animosity was the attitude one had to have against their former beliefs in order to be considered a Christian. The Africans’ former beliefs were not to be seen as simply something else they believed, but something nonsensical, evil; inferior. Ancestors were disrespected; shrines were burned and denigrated; sacred oral stories and tales were aspersed – all in order for Christian missionaries to believe the conversions of the African people.

In Arrow of God, Chinua Achebe tells the story of how Christianity supplanted traditional belief in Igboland and of the general onset of colonialism. One story in particular involves Oduche – the son of the protagonist, Ezeulu. Oduche is sent to the Christian school by his father in order to learn the ways, language, and religion of the Europeans. In Oduche’s conversion to Christianity, he is encouraged to kill a python – a sacred animal for the Igbo. Instead of killing the python, he reasons that he will lock it in a box, thereby suffocating and indirectly killing it. Ezeulu discovers the snake locked in the box – exhausted, but alive – and upheaval in the town ensues (Achebe, 1989). This illustrates how disrespecting traditional beliefs was nearly a pre-

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19 Or more accurately, for many Igbo societies.
requisite for becoming a Christian. Joseph Awolalu makes this point in his addition to Jacob Olupona’s *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*:

“All new converts were taught in the mission houses and were encouraged to look down upon their culture. Later, mission schools and colleges soon sprang up in many places; and men and women were taught the scriptures and reading, writing, and arithmetic. Eventually, those who were educated along this line became converted and bade adieu to the old faith. Some of them who were knowledgeable in the Scriptures became powerful preachers against the ‘idolatrous practices’ of their people. In this way, traditional life was deeply undermined, and the family structure was disrupted (Olupona, 1991, p.114).”

While this inferiority complex that was instilled in many Africans who became Christians was unsurprising – as this was the modus operandi of colonialism – it is still somewhat difficult to comprehend how this was done on a spiritual level. Then again, it was not that long ago that religious/spiritual hierarchies were standard in Religious and Anthropological studies. Monotheism was ranked somewhere above polytheism, and below both of them lie the “primal religion” of indigenous peoples who had yet to advance to the sophistication of monotheism (Cox, 2007). This seems to still take place, as many Christians tend to de-emphasize elements of Christianity that are similar to traditional/indigenous beliefs. I would argue that those more esoteric elements (e.g., talking snakes, resurrection, human sacrifice, the symbolic cannibalism of the Eucharist, etc.) have been relegated to the background of Christianity (or reduced to “symbolism”) in order for Christianity to be seen as distinct and better; above and beyond the elements evident within many indigenous spiritualities. Aligning itself with modernity, development, and progress, Christianity is the religion of the evolved human who is culture-less and societally non-partisan.

While listening to a podcast on the history of Sikhism, similar points about monotheism stuck out to me that are also evident within the promulgation of Christianity. It seems as though monotheism was the attempt at the unification of vast numbers of people on a religious/spiritual
level. The promotion of “one god” seems to be with the hope of establishing a common ground from peoples of various ethnic identities, languages, and geographies. However, conflict over religious/political reasons seems to be a mainstay, contemporarily. But while seen as the lesser belief system, these indigenous/traditional beliefs known at one point and time as “primal” religions”, naturally and successfully established religious/spiritual pluralism without the need to force everyone under the same god. Jacob Olupona makes this point clear:

“Another feature of African religious experience supports and encouraged pluralism. While religions exist as a potential cleavage within societies of multifaiths and culticultures, the unifying elements for monotheistic religions have either been a theistic concept of God or the sacred kinship and chieftain ideology. In African religious heritage, there is an emphasis on pluralism and, inevitably, tolerance toward other religious and cultural traditions (Olupona, 2000, p.xviii).”

He goes on to show how this particular issue has negatively affected African social structures:

“In several countries in Africa, the contemporary religious exclusivism and intolerance characteristic of Christian and Islamic fundamental revivalism have led to serious crises among adherents of these two religions and to violence and suspicion in society (Olupona, 2000, p. xviii).”

While so many Africans have left (even if in name alone) their traditional spiritualities, possibly with a hope of a globalized unity on the basis of religion, progressing together within modernity, this hope has shown itself to be a farce. Conflict, wars, and strife take place on a regular basis – many a times in the name of these seemingly unifying monotheistic religions.

This hierarchy has also relegated African history as insignificant, and replaced traditional ancestor veneration with its own deity, saints, and revered ancestors. Ako Adjei, in his contribution to Ram Desai’s *Christianity in Africa as Seen by the Africans*, points to the issue of teaching biblical history at the expense of African history:
“In the church African young men and women are taught to pay high respect to, and develop a sentimental attachment toward, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and may other biblical characters who, we all know, were all great men and women who made definite contributions to the long and painful history of the Jewish nation in the ancient world. It is ridiculous for an African boy or girl to be taught in the Christian church and mission schools to call Abraham or Jacob their father or to look upon Jerusalem as their holy city. But the mission schools do their best to impart this kind of education. African history is thus undermined, and the indigenous traditional culture consequently begins to lose its charm and its captivating appeal to the imagination of African youth (Desai, 1962. p.77).”

Here, we see that African history and its continuation has been negatively affected. In some instances, ancestor veneration served the community as not only the spiritual connection to the ancestors, but also in that it revived family and community members that had passed; it acted as its own “history” lesson in many ways. It was ritualized memory. One could hardly tell the difference between the ancestor veneration done by Africans and the prayer to saints carried out within Catholicism, but within this/that colonial reality, everything Africans did had to be condemned in order to replace it.

I began venerating my ancestors soon after I returned home from my stay in Oyotunji, although I had been considering it for years. In Oyotunji, I received the knowledge I felt I needed in order to venerate properly. Once I graduated and went to stay back with my parents, I brought my shrine along and set it up in the closet of the room I was staying in – my old bedroom. I can recall my mother finding it and asking me about it amid side-eyes, blank stares, and random comments about how unsafe candles were (in an empty closet). My nephew, maybe 8 at the time, asked me about the fruit and water that was present on the shrine, at one point. In an as calculated a word-choice I could muster, I mentioned that I didn’t believe that the ancestors were dead; I believed they were with us, everywhere and all the time. He hurries, screaming to my dad about what I’d said. Later, my dad approaches me and says that maybe I shouldn’t tell my
nephew “everything” I believe. Fair enough. Not everyone is at the point at which they can respectfully accept another’s religious beliefs or practices (regardless of age).

I’ve been told that when I speak with confidence and conviction about my beliefs and practices, that the respect of others will ensue. But it seems almost insurmountable, when there is such ignorance coupled with disdain for indigenous African beliefs, and at such a core level of Western society. The inferior status the spirituality was given initially during colonialism persists, and it is something many of us who practice traditional beliefs still have to deal with on a regular basis. I was asked recently, by a family member of my partner, to “hide” my Esu when my partner’s family comes to our home. Considering that my partner and his family are from Nigeria, this is not a case of ignorance. This is simply a continuation of the colonial legacy whereby everything African has been denigrated – especially, our gods, our ancestors, our spirits, and the manners with which we connect with them. And unfortunately, we (Africans) have internalized these views and censor one another when one doesn’t abide by the colonial rules.

While conversion to Christianity did take place on some level for Africans, it is also clear that we did so in our own particular ways; innovating new interpretations and denomination of the religion that was once not ours. In introducing various elements existent within our traditions, we made it our own. This can be seen within various African Christian denominations, as well as in Christian denominations within the African diaspora, such as the Black church in the context of the United States, and encompassing the syncretic Catholic beliefs in Cuba and Haiti, amongst

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20 This is a representation of the god Esu/Elegba. The representation is a stone fashioned into a face/head with cowrie shells for eyes and a mouth. My Esu sits on the interior corner of my front door, as that is where the road of my particular Esu dwells. Accompanying Esu is water, a candle, and other offerings from time to time.

21 More accurately, it’s a continuation of the practice of doing those things – “juju” – in private, behind closed doors, and after dark. Certainly, one wouldn’t think of doing such things out in the open, unashamed, and with confidence.
other Caribbean and South American examples. Paralleling many of the factors within the Black (American) Church, African Christian denominations have included a heavy emphasis on music, dance, glossolalia, baptism, and other elements that were prevalent in traditional beliefs.

Conflict resulting from colonialism has marred many African communities, but others have simply accommodated this new religion, while still maintaining strong ties to their traditions. Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan, in her contribution to Jacob Olupona’s *Beyond Primitivism Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, speaks on the Republic of Benin’s context of religious pluralism.

“There is no, as in the past, most Benin people accommodate both religious spheres. They equate Christianity with modernity, and indigenous religion with their cultural identity, tradition, and the Oba. The last of these equated with ‘themselves’ as a people and an ethnic group in a pluralist nation-state. The two exist side by side, with the individual determining the degree of identification. Each religion is regarded as a separate arena of action. Conflict arises when representatives of a world religion insist Benin followers reject dual loyalties (Olupona, 2006, p.196).”

It appears as though communities can live peaceably whereby members of their communities are Christian and member of other faiths (although rare). But what cannot take place in these functioning communities and countries is a disrespect of the traditional/indigenous religion. What Benin has done differently is the continued embrace and reverence for the traditions, while refusing to submit to the uncompromising nature of Christianity. The Republic of Benin is known for resisting colonial rule long after many of their neighbors had acquiesced or been militarily forced into colonial rule. Obviously, their spirit of going against the grain is also carried in their religious/spiritual dealings.

Whether Christianity (or Islam) possesses longevity within the African context, or among African peoples remains to be seen. I like to believe, as Wole Soyinka so eloquently details in his addition to *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture*,
that the gods/spirits/ancestors are always there, even if under the surface, even if known by
different names, and even if abandoned in some ways; they are still and always will be there.

“So the slaves displayed the images of the saints but addressed them in the
parallel names of their own deities – St. Lazarus/Sopona, St. Anthony/Ogun, Our
Lady of the Candles/Osun, etc. And here is the point: this never constituted a
spiritual dilemma, since the system of the gods has always been one of
complementarities, of affinities, and of expansion – but of the non-aggressive
kind. The deities could subsume themselves within these alien personages and
eventually take them over. One cinematic illustration of this suggests itself –
those films of alien body snatchers where the creatures from outer space insert
their beings into the carapace of earthlings, eventually dominate, not only the
human forms but the environment and culture, insert themselves into crevices of
landscape and social actualities, and can only be flushed out with the aid of weed
killers, flame throwers, gamma rays, or quicklime. The difference, of course, is
that the African deities were made of sterner yet more malleable stuff – the
principle of alloys. Always generous in encounters with alien ‘earthlings,’ they
accommodated, blended, and eventually triumphed (Olupona, 2008, p.45).”
CONCLUSION

In Michael Gomez’s *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South,* he details some of the narratives and commentary from formerly enslaved Africans who mentioned stories that had been passed down through the generations about being captured; about the manner in which they were enslaved. He noted that there were similarities in the narratives from African Americans of different ages, geographic locations, and experiences. They all had similar stories in which the Africans who took part in enslavement were condemned and cursed, but the European bore the blame. He recontextualizes memory and the importance and utility of it. Memory, in general, is supposed to be based on real, lived experiences and on the recounting of them as accurately as possible. Its value lies in the ability to recall events, objectively, as they were. But when we speak about memory, as Africans in various contexts and as descendants of a particular legacy, memory functions in different ways. Rosalind Shaw refers to this as “memory techniques” (Shaw, 2002).

“The story was not told as it actually happened but recast to convey what the African-based community perceived as the essential truth of the experience. This is critical, for the presentation of facts alone, to the African way of thinking, cannot communicate the full meaning of an event. What physically happened and the deeper meaning of what happened are very different things. And for the sake of the African-based community, for whom these accounts were expressly designed, it was crucial that they grasp the deeper implications (Gomez, 1998, p.199).”

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22 Rosalind Shaw makes a similar comment on the issue and value of memory: “What is remembered from the past, the argument goes, depends on the interests and concerns of those in the present, such that every generation detaches the memories in question more and more irrevocably from the original events and processes. Memory moves in only one direction: forward (Shaw, 2002, p.12).”
This “memory technique” is important to consider when speaking about historical and present perspectives on spirituality/religion, as these are complicated concepts being filtered through complicated and traumatic experiences, being processed in a complicated and oppressive society by a descendant of this legacy with an agenda. There are certain memories that I can gleam from typical academic outlets, and then there are the memories and connections that I can feel; that I know from my experiences as an African American. I hope I was able to speak to both those sides memory in honest and transparent ways. My/our enslaved ancestors felt it important to collaborate on an oral history in order to pass down the “moral of the story (of enslavement)”. Likewise, I want this paper to be a collection of “morals to the story”. I want to have offered the/a spiritual “moral to the story” for all of the authors and books I have quoted. I hope I have offered a different, spiritual view of past and present events.

When I speak about Africa, Africans, and seem to speak as if we are or were a monolith and imply homogeneity within societies, it is done within this spirit of emphasizing root of the point I’m trying to make. I am aware of all the possible instances where “all” should be “many”, and “many” should be “some”. And while I do view those distinctions as important, considering the nature of modernity that tends to homogenize cultures and aid in cultural erasure, I also view the spiritual heart of the matter to be even more important. Consequently, as I reference in the introduction, I have used many of the terms that are controversial in their use interchangeably. This is to show not only that many of the terms are interchangeable, but also that they are fluid and their usage is malleable.

It is still imperative for me to offer objectivity within the historical events, individuals, and experiences that I presented. As I spoke of in the introduction, I hope that this has offered a relative, as well as objective approach to this study of African history and African
religion/spirituality. After all, this duality is in keeping with the duality of the spiritualities of many African peoples. These are not dueling concepts at separate ends of the spectrum – they can (and perhaps, should) work in tandem with each other.
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