

African Traditional Religion and Humanities' Scholarship: The Contributions of Edward Geoffrey Parrinder and Kofi Asare Opoku

Olatunde Oyewole Ogunbiyi and Lydia Bosede Akande

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary academic discussions on African Traditional Religion, there is an emphasis on considering the works of "patriarch" scholars and their attendant influences on the field. These scholars have blazed the trail for future scholars that will either tow or abandon the path they had opened for posterity. It is important to examine the works of these scholars for several reasons, a few of which are highlighted in this study. Many of the scholars themselves are dying out, and their exits are a cause for concern. The legacies they leave behind should be made available for upcoming researchers to act as springboards for future studies. Besides, they were the ones who actually started a serious academic examination of African Traditional Religion. This is a religion that has hitherto been subjected to a series of misinterpretations and consequent misrepresentations. Theirs were apologies of African Traditional Religion in the face of virulent persecutions from Western scholars when prejudice was the order of the day for anything that was not Western. A few of these patriarch scholars of African Traditional Religion were Europeans, while others were Africans.

Among these are the likes of Geoffrey Parrinder, John S. Mbiti, E. Bolaji Idowu, Joseph Omosade Awolalu, Kofi Opoku Asare, and P. Adelumbe

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He served on the editorial boards of several journals and gave many prestigious lectures around the world.¹⁰ He was also a visiting professor at the International Christian University in Tokyo (1977–1978) and a visiting lecturer at the University of Surrey (1978–1982). His publishing output was phenomenal, including twenty-nine single-authored and six edited books between 1949 and 1992, as well as numerous shorter works. He continued writing until January 2003, after forty-five years of producing his last report on religion for the *Annual Register of World Events*. He always remained humble and kind, even a little shy. He is survived by his wife and their son and daughter. One son predeceased him.

Contributions to the Study of African Religion

The distinguished scholar Edward Geoffrey Simons Parrinder, who died at the age of ninety-five,¹¹ advocated for the study of world religions at all levels of education. As a teacher, writer, and member of the World Congress of Faiths and the Shap working party on world religions in education, set up in 1969, he gave much encouragement to those working in schools and colleges in Britain and abroad. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*¹² also listed him as one of the scholars worthy of mention. The work attests to the fact that Parrinder was a widely traveled missionary and teacher, who assisted in the production of researchers who pioneered and continued to contribute to the study of religion of the Africans. His efforts, as seen in his books, show that he was familiar with the religious practices of the African people, especially in West Africa. His extensive sojourn in Ibadan allowed him to understand the practical aspects of Yorùbá culture and general worldview. For a man who had traversed the whole world, it was possible for him to compare and contrast African Religion with such world religions as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and a host of other spiritualities.

Books

Geoffrey Parrinder wrote several books, most of which were centered on his research as he labored as a Methodist missionary in different parts of West Africa and Asia. The following is a list of some of his writings, culled from Wikipedia.¹³

- *West African Religion* (1949, 1961)¹⁴
- *African Psychology* (1951)
- *An African City* (1953)
- *African Traditional Religion*, London: SPCK (1954)
- *The Story of Ketu* (1956)
- *Witchcraft, European and African* (1958), London: Faber & Faber, (1963) (1970) ISBN 0-571-09060-5
- *The Christian Approach to the Animist*
- *The Christian Debate*

- *Worship in the World's Religions* (1961, 1974)
- *Comparative Religion*
- *Asian Religions*
- *The Faiths of Mankind: A Guide to the World's Living Religions*, Crowell (1965)
- *African Mythology*, Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd. (1967), ISBN 0-600-00042-7
- *What World Religions Teach Us* (1968)
- *Man and His Gods* (1971; US title: *Religions of the World*)
 - Revised edition: *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present* (1983), Geoffrey Parrinder (editor), Facts on File, ISBN 0-87196-129-6
- *A Dictionary of Non-Christian Religions*, Westminster John Knox Press (1973), ISBN 0-664-20981-5
- *A Book of World Religions*
- *Jesus in the Quran*, Oneworld Publications (1995), ISBN 1-85168-094-2
- *Avatar and Incarnation: A Comparison of Indian & Christian Beliefs*, London: Faber & Faber (1970), Oxford University Press. (1982) ISBN 0-19-520361-5
- *Upanishads, Gita, and Bible: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Christian Scriptures*, Harper & Row (1972), ISBN 0-06-131660-1
- *African Traditional Religion*, Greenwood Pub. Group, 3rd edition (1970), ISBN 0-8371-3401-3
- *The Bhagavad Gita: A Verse Translation*, London: Sheldon Press (1974), ISBN 0-85969-018-0, Dutton Books (1975), ISBN 0-525-47390-4, Oneworld Publications (1996) ISBN 1-85168-117-5
- *The Indestructible Soul*
- *The Wisdom of the Forest: Selections from the Hindu Upanishads*, New York: New Directions, (1976), ISBN 0-8112-0606-8
- *Mysticism in the World's Religions*, London: Sheldon Press (1976), ISBN 0-85969-085-7. Oxford University Press in USA: (1977), ISBN 0-19-502185-1. Oneworld Publications: (1995), ISBN 1-85168-101-9
- *Sex in the World's Religions*, Oxford University Press (1980), ISBN 0-19-520202-3
- *Encountering World Religions: Questions of Religious Truth*, Crossroad Pub. Co. (1987), ISBN 0-8245-0826-2
- *Son of Joseph: The Parentage of Jesus*, T. & T. Clark Publishers, Ltd. (1993), ISBN 0-567-29213-4
- *A Concise Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Oneworld Publications (1998), ISBN 1-85168-174-4
- *Wisdom of Jesus*, Oneworld Publications (2000), ISBN 1-85168-225-2
- *The Routledge Dictionary of Religious and Spiritual Quotations*, New York: Routledge (2001), ISBN 0-415-23393-3
- *West African Psychology: A Comparative Study of Psychological and Religious Thought*, James Clarke Company, (2002), ISBN 0-227-17053-9
- *Sexual Morality in the World Religions*, Oneworld Publications, (2003), ISBN 1-85168-108-6

mysterious powers that can be either benevolent or malevolent, the innumerable rituals, and practices that regulate the consciousness of the African people. It is in light of this that, in **African Traditional Religion**, it is difficult to determine the boundaries existing between the daily and religious life of the people of Africa. It is not possible to decide on where the physical dovetails into the spiritual or vice versa in the life of the Africans.

PARRINDER'S LIFE AND CAREER

Early Life: 1910-1933

Edward Geoffrey Simos Parrinder (April 10, 1910-June 16, 2005) was a Professor of Comparative Religion at King's College London. He was a Methodist minister and missionary in several parts of Africa and author of over thirty books that he was privileged to have written because of his stay in several parts of the world.⁵ For about twenty years, he was a missionary in the Benin Republic and Ivory Coast.

Parrinder was born in New Barnet, Hertfordshire, on April 30, 1910, to William Patrick and Florence Mary.⁶ His father was a devout Wesleyan Methodist member who worked in London and eventually had his own business until about 1930 when it went bankrupt. At one time, he considered taking up missionary work to Africa but was persuaded by his own parents. It was Edward who eventually became the missionary. While reviewing his works, Hastings has the following to say about the background:

In 1919, his parents moved to Leigh-on-Sea in Essex; there, he was educated at the Leigh Hall College. At the age of sixteen, after completing his secondary school education, she started work as a booking clerk with the railway. While working with the railways, he studied at Richmond College in London between 1929-1932 and became a minister of the Methodist denomination. he also went to Montpellier, a city in France, to study French and further his study of Theology. In 1933, against all attempts to dissuade him, he left London for the Republic of Benin (formerly called Dahomey). Here, he began his career as a Missionary and Researcher on the Traditional Religion of the Africans. His souourn in Africa enabled him to have a particular observation enperience with the african people and their culture. Though he was shuttling from Africa to Europe. He spent a total of nineteen years in Africa.⁷

Missionary and Academician 1936-2005

The bedrock of Parrinder's research work was his thirst for soul winning. His mission for living in Europe for Africa is that of spreading the gospel in Africa. This was an unconscious responsibility passed on to him by his father, who wanted to take up missionary activities in Africa but was dissuaded by his parents. He thus became a minister and an academician with a passion for studying world religions. From Benin, he proceeded to the Ivory Coast; these countries

are French-speaking West African countries. His sojourn in these places lasted between 1933 and 1946. In 1936, he returned to England to marry Mary, his heartthrob whom he met at a meeting of the Methodists, and also to be ordained as a minister. He was involved in Methodist circuit work both in Redruth, Cornwall (1940-1943), and in Guernsey (1946-1949) as he shuttled from Africa.

An extremely versatile fellow, Parrinder seized the opportunity of his work with the Methodist to advance his study where he had his B.A. and B.D. degrees and then proceeded to obtain his M.A., M.Th., and Ph.D., focusing on the indigenous religious beliefs of West Africans. This led him to join the league of authors as he started publishing books. His first book, *West African Religion* (1949), was followed by more research on religion in Ibadan, published as *Religion in an African City* (1953). Other important publications were *African Psychology* (1951), *African Traditional Religion* (1954), *Witchcraft* (1958), and *The Story of Ketu* (1956).

Between 1949 and 1958, he taught Religious Studies at the University College in Ibadan. In 1949, he was appointed to the highly innovative Department of Religious Studies at the University College, Ibadan in Nigeria, first as a lecturer (1949-1950) and then as a senior lecturer (1950-1958), teaching many African students and making lasting friendships.⁸ He was able to influence several African students who later collaborated with him in the further study of African Religion. In 1958, he became a reader in the Comparative Study of Religions at the King's College in London, where the future Archbishop Desmond Tutu was among his students. Parrinder was a founding member of the British Association for the Study of Religions, its honorary Secretary (1960-1972), President (1972-1977), and a life member. Awarded a personal Chair in 1970, he was Dean of the faculty of Theology (1972-1974) and retired in 1977.

King, an avid follower of Parrinder, offers additional information about him in a book he edited in honor of the eminent scholar. He had this to say about him:

While a Professor in the Comparative Study of Religions at King's College in London, Parrinder was a prolific writer, most notably on African Religions. His works on Indian Religions, Islam and Comparative themes that appealed to a broad reading public, and helped promote a better understanding and closer collaboration between members of different faiths and cultures. His textbook, *What World Religions Teach Us* (1968), became a best seller. He was active in the London Society for the Study of Religion where he was President (1980-1982), and the London Society of Jews and Christians, where he was also President (1981-1990) and honorary life President. As a founder member and co-president of the Shap working party, he helped advance the study of religion as a significant subject.⁹

European Christian spiritualities. According to him, the African Churches have done a lot to situate Christianity in Africa.²⁴

Opoku's academic interest in African Religion made him not to treat the enigmatic subject in abstract or in isolation. He also situated the religion in the context of other world religions. One of his writings along this line is his work on mysticism, where he made it clear that Africans also have mystics as it is understood in other religions. In this work, he tried to compare African mysticism with that of the East.²⁵ Furthermore, he considers the independence of the mind as an issue that had always occupied his mind since he was in the Seminary.²⁶

A scholar of high repute, he related, interpreted, and intertwined African Religion with several other disciplines. He explored African Religion in the area of the provision of alternative medicine where African medicines have proven to have better efficacious effects than the Western counterparts in several areas.²⁷ By extension, he related the African as a cultural experience.²⁸ While investigating religion in Africa during the colonial era,²⁹ he explored the communal living of the Africans that has made them unique from other ethnic groups the world over.³⁰

APPRAISAL OF E. G. PARRINDER AND K. A. OPOKU TO THE SCHOLARSHIP OF AFRICAN RELIGION

The works of the duo of E. G. Parrinder and K. A. Opoku will continue to speak on. Judging by their appearances in the transitional study of the Africans, both contributed abundantly to the study of African Religion in Africa. Parrinder stood at the transition between two poles, the scholars of African Religion. On one side are those who were non-Africans who wished to portray the African Religion as bad. It is in this group that armchair investigators, Christian missionaries, colonial administrators, and explorers belong. The majority of these people were filled with racial prejudice, false reporters, and those who believe that Africans are so weak they cannot conceive of a God. On the other side are the Africans who were contemporary beneficiaries of their forefathers' faith though educated now in the Western style. These ones knew what foreigners said about their religion was incorrect, and they had the true account of the religion of their fathers. Parrinder is in the midst of these two people. He had studied the religions of the continent of Africa up to Asia, and he was convinced that beyond the lies that his fellow foreigners tell the world, the truth cannot be hidden. What makes the contributions of Parrinder valuable is that he gave an unbiased account of the Africans as a European Christian missionary. Besides, he actually visited Africa to study the religious consciousness of the African people and their culture for himself, and he presented his findings in an honest manner in several ways. He was a Christian researcher into the spirituality of the Africans. Both of them were studied at one time or another, African Religion, and at other times comparing African Religion with

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other world religions. Opoku was also a transitional researcher. While Parrinder stood between his people on one side and the likes of Mbiti, Awolalu, and Idowu on the other side, Opoku stood between these patriarch scholars and the contemporary researchers as they exist today. While the patriarch scholars focus primarily on writing apologies about African Religion, Opoku was able to ride upon their shoulders to dig into deeper recesses of African traditional religious ontology. Having the works of earlier scholars of African Traditional Religion until the patriarch scholars, he was able to advance the epistemology of African Religion beyond the frontiers of these earlier scholars.

CONCLUSION

Today, the academic study of African Traditional Religion is soaring high in the field of Religious Studies. Thanks to the efforts of virulent scholars like the ones we are just studying. This is evidenced by the quantum of student graduates, graduating up to the doctoral level. Many of those that these erudite scholars have influenced have risen to become Professors of African Religion and Comparative Religious Studies with an emphasis on African Religion. Owing to these scholars' efforts, African Religion is not only taught in African universities but it is also taught in many universities throughout the world. This has led to the conversion of foreigners who have, at various times, visited Africa to see how God is worshiped in this religion. The advances made by these scholars have been interpreted in several academic disciplines leading to the revitalization of African Traditional Religion and its awareness all over the world. It must, however, be said that in spite of the contributions of these fathers of the academic study of African Religion, much is yet to be explored, and the stage is open for new depths into the living traditions of the African people.

NOTES

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2. Ogolla Maurice, "The Challenges Facing Religion in the Contemporary World: The Kenyan Situation," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 4, no. 3, February 2014.
3. Karl Rahner, "Religion," *Encyclopedia of Theology*, (Crossroad Pub. Co., 1975).
4. J. O. Awolalu, What Is African Traditional Religion? In *Studies in Comparative Religion*, vol. 10, no. 2. (Spring, 1976), 1-10. World Wisdom, Inc. www.studiesincomparativereligion.com
5. <https://peoplepill.com/people/geoffrey-parrinder>
6. Martin Howard Frank Forward, "An Examination of Geoffrey Parrinder's Contribution to the Study of Religion," Ph.D. Thesis Department of Theology and Religious Studies, (University of Bristol, 1995).

The books he wrote have helped advance the study of ATR in quite a variety of ways. Aside from the fact that the books were evidence of his research on African soil, they negate the Europeans' perception of the African people and their religion. Being that as it were, the books became points of departure from latter scholars like Dopamu, who were beneficiaries of his works.

KOFI ASARE OPOKU

Kofi Asare Opoku is a prolific writer who touched virtually every aspect of African Religion from the Ghanaian perspective. His writings, commencing from African Religion, expanded to the capturing of African indigenous Churches and then to comparing the religion with other world religions. His academic career spanned over forty years, which has taken him all over the world. The primary courses he taught included Religion and Culture. He wrote with the passion of one who loves the African Religion though not a practitioner. Also, one is not left in doubt about his knowledge of the people's religion. In several ways, Opoku has influenced and will continue to influence generations of scholars both in Africa and beyond. Opoku rose to the position of Associate Professor of Religion and Ethics in the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana located in Legon. He then proceeded to Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, the United States, where he rose to the position of a Professor of Religious Studies. He was once the Chairman of the Kwabena Nketia Centre for Africana Studies. He retired and went back to Ghana, where he is contributing to community development through his farming business. The farm is located at Mampong, Akuapem, in the Eastern Region of Ghana.¹⁵

Contributions of Kofi Opoku Asare

As a lecturer, Opoku's influence transcends the African continent. He was a widely traveled scholar whose labor was in high demand. He lectured in Ghana, South Africa, and also in the United States. Apart from these, he is known to have traversed the world as a visiting lecturer or as a conference attendee where much of his presentations were on the subject matter of African Religion. It is along this line that he was able to raise the next generation of African Traditional Religious scholars. They today have continued his legacy in African tertiary institutions and outside the shores of Africa. Many of these scholars have become professors in various universities in Ghana and across the world. The academic study of African Religion gained prominence, with students obtaining their doctoral degrees in the discipline. This has led to the commencement of African Religion as a discipline in various universities across Ghana.

By providing the academic footing for African Religion, Opoku Asare was able to bring to the limelight quite a lot of materials that had hitherto not been

brought to the fore by earlier writers. In addition to this, he is in line with fellow scholars like Mbiti, Idowu, Awolalu, Dopamu, and Abimbola, to mention only a few who have attempted to defend the religion of their forebears. This they do in their writing apologetic books stating in clear terms the African peoples' understanding of their spiritualities. He not only wrote apologetics. He also, as a result of his being familiar with the nuances of the traditional religion, was able to present an account of the religion of his people. This he did through the writing of several books and article presentations in conferences and publications. His book, *West African Traditional Religion* (1978),¹⁶ captures the essence of the traditional religion of the people of West Africa. In many of his writings, he spoke about the worldview of Africans, especially the Akan people. In one of his articles, he spoke about their concept of God and their cultural beliefs.¹⁷ His view here is further complemented by his exposition of the folk beliefs of the Africans.¹⁸ Closely following this is an examination of the Mami Water phenomenon that is common among the West African coastal ethnic groups. These ethnic groups often believe in the existence of a river divinity called Mami Water. He examined the phenomenon among the Ewe of Ghana. His conclusion is that the riverine divinities are a part of the African spiritual landscape.¹⁹

Concerning his primary contribution to the academic field of African Religion, his appreciation of African proverbs transcends other contributions. He wrote several books on the topic and made innumerable contributions to the same at conferences, on talk shows, and even in newspapers. Worthy of mention here was his talk show about the fact that Valentine is not strange to Africans as it is in the heart of all Africans to express love to their kith and kin and everyone on the face of the earth.²⁰ According to him, proverbs are an integral part of the Africans, especially the West Africans, particularly the Ghanaians, that nothing is often said without interjections of appropriate proverbs. These proverbs are a repertoire of the African peoples' philosophy and world view. Out of the several books he published with a view to driving home his emphasis on proverbs include *Speak to the Winds: Proverbs from Africa* (1975)²¹ and *Hearing and Keeping: Akan Proverbs* (1975).

His interest in the African indigenous Churches is worthy of mention. Opoku's bent on African Religion made his escapade in indigenous African Churches worthwhile. He was able to present the manner in which the African Christians were able to contextualize the Christianity that was imported into Africa by the Europeans. Opoku was able to study churches like the Musama Christo Disco Church.²² This is a church that combines Christianity with several Akan religio-cultural practices. In one of his interesting articles, he detailed the deep relationship between the traditional religious consciousness of Ghanaians and their approach to Christianity that was introduced to them.²³ African Church, the dramatic effect of this, according to Opoku, is the general acceptance of this form of Christianity by the Akan populace. He looked at the African indigenous Churches as the confluence of African traditional and

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<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1758-6631.1990.tb02204.x> (accessed November 8, 2020).

The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion interrogates and presents robust and comprehensive contributions from interdisciplinary experts and scholars. Offering a range of perspectives and opinions through the prism of understanding the past about African Traditional religions and, more importantly, capturing their dynamics in the present and projecting their sustainability and relevance for the future, this volume is an essential resource for knowledge and understanding of African Traditional religions in the global space of religious traditions.



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