

## **African Traditional Religion in a Globalizing World**

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**Abstract:** *The initial forces of globalization that hugely affected the development of African Traditional Religion, were the forces of Colonialism and the Missionary Enterprises of both Islam and Christianity. This piece therefore studied the meaning and nature of African Traditional Religion in the midst of the globalizing process. It first studies the meaning of religion and Africa, as basis for understanding African Traditional Religion; it further studies the peculiarities of African Traditional Religion in the midst of other religions in the globalizing world; the derogatory concepts given to African Traditional Religion with the emergence of globalization, the difficulties of studying African Traditional Religion and reasons why it should be studied. It submits that in spite of the declining numbers of the followers of African Traditional Religion, it will continue to be a living religion in many years to come.*

**Keywords:** *African, Traditional, Religion, Meaning, Nature, Globalizing, World.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Kanu and Paul (2011) had observed that in Africa, there is widespread belief in a Supreme God, with a profound sense of the sacred and mystery. Thus, it is difficult to separate the life of the African from his personal inclinations to the divine. It is in this regard that he does everything with the consciousness of God. Mbiti (1969) puts this succinctly,

Wherever the African is, there is his religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop, he takes it with him to a beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament. (p. 2)

In the contention of Njoku (2004), this aspect of his daily life is such that,

The African man had many taboos to observe, and many daily rituals to perform, either to appease the community or the divinities. If he was not an indirect or unconscious slave of the dominant conscious, he held perpetual allegiance to one divinity or another. If he was 'free' with men, he was not free with nature or his environment. Suppose community and environment allow him to live his life with fewer burdens, he would still have to pay the debts owed by his past ancestors. (p. 57).

This religion of the African, named African Traditional Religion has proved very difficult to define; however, in spite of this difficulty, this piece attempts to give an explanation of what African Traditional Religion is all about, basically by sampling the opinions of different scholars in this regard. First, it begins by a study of the meaning of religion, which itself is enigmatic and elusive. This is followed by a definition of African Traditional Religion. From the definition, it draws out the peculiarities of ATR, studies the derogatory concepts used in the description of African Traditional Religion, mainly by the west and also by some Africans themselves who very often, out of sheer ignorance, misinformation have not bothered to know it's worth or importance. It further studies the difficulties involved in this study and future of African Traditional Religion.

### **2. RELIGION: MEANING AND NATURE**

The word religion is an enigmatic and elusive concept, thus difficult to define. This is compounded by the fact that it deals with immaterial objects that cannot be empirically verified. It has been defined diversely by people of diverse interests. As a concept, it is vast and complex,

and as such must be approached from a multidimensional viewpoint. Due to its complexity and breadth, Idowu (1973) observed that Professor Leuba tried to assemble forty-eight definitions of religion as advanced by scholars, during which he added two of his own. The aim of this assemblage was to arrive at a definition that everyone would accept. However, Leuba ended up giving a definition that was too broad that no one accepted it.

As a result of the complexity of this concept, it is not surprising that it is one thing to the anthropologist, another to the psychologist, another to the sociologist, another to the historian, another to the economist, another to the mystic and another to the Christian etc. However, three elements have been constant in the definitions of religion: belief, cult/worship and morals. This belief is in a being who is supreme, in cult/worship, the dependence of subjects on the supreme being is expressed, in morals, the rules and regulations to guide the new relationship is drawn up.

Religion, according to Ekwunife (1990) is man's awareness and recognition of his dependent relationship on a transcendent Being the Wholly Other, namable or un-namable, personalized or impersonalized expressible in human society through beliefs, worship and ethical or moral behavior. As a phenomenon in human society it is a catalyst, a seasonal elevator, a welder corrosive and pollinator, to name but a few of its complex activities. For example, the sociologist, Yinger (cited by Ekwunife, 2009) sees religion as a catalyst to man's ultimate problems. As elevator, it can uplift and glue a believers' spiritual horizon to transcendental plane for communion and communication with a believed Ultimate. As a welder, it can unite and bind people's outlook, motivating them to a common action with an imbued sense of the sacred. Even though Durkheim wrongly identified the sacred Ultimate of the community as the society divinized, the fact remains that religion acts as a binding force both in moral definitions and ethical prescriptions. At the cognitive level it can corrode the minds of believers with wrong assumptions about the superhuman Ultimate which in practical life filters into their emotional sphere and psycho-motor activities.

According to Geetu (cited in Scharf, 1971), religion is:

A system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasion and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating concepts of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (p. 33).

Tillich (1959) understands religion as a dimension of depths in all human endeavour. Religion makes itself felt in man's moral, cognitive and aesthetic spheres. In each, he wrote that "the religious aspect point's to that which is ultimate, infinite, and unconditional in man's spiritual life" (p. 7). From the foregoing, it is observable that it is religion that co-ordinates and elevates these inherent qualities in man to a transcendental plane, thereby imbuing them with deep meanings in human existence.

### **3. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

Having understood the meaning and nature of religion, there remains the question of the meaning of African Traditional Religion. For a better appreciation of the concept *African Traditional Religion*, there remains the need to analyse the primary words: African and Traditional.

**African:** It speaks of a relation to, or characteristic of Africa, or its people, language, culture, geography, etc.

**Traditional:** the concept traditional has been contended by scholars, since it is suggestive of that which is ancient, and thus no longer practiced. In this chapter, it is used to denote indigenous practices and beliefs, facts, customs, often handed down from generation to generation, unwritten or written. As such, it combines the idea of the past, present and the future.

### **4. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

African Traditional Religion, as already seen, is a nebulous concept. Unlike Christianity and Islam, it is not composed of a single concept, neither does it have a founder or scripture or laid

down liturgy or ritual. This is further complicated by the fact that Africa is a large continent with different tribes and belief systems, and as a religion embraces the totality of the life of Africans: politics, economics, social etc. This would certainly affect the definition and methodology employed in the study of African Traditional Religion. As a religion that emerged with the culture of particular peoples in Africa. It has further given rise to the problem of nomenclature. If African Traditional Religion has its roots in tribes and clans, should it then be called African Traditional Religion or African Traditional Religions? Scholars have argued and continue to debate on this issue. Both are correct. It all depends on the emphasis that one is making, either on its unity or plurality.

However, African Traditional Religion, as a concept, can be employed in two complementary senses. Loosely, it encompasses all African beliefs and practices that are considered religious but neither Christian nor Islamic. The expression is also used almost as a technical term for a particular reading of such beliefs and practices, one that purports to show that they constitute a systematic whole- a religion comparable to other world religions. In that sense the concept was new and radical when it was introduced by G. Parrinder in 1954, but later developed by Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti in this direction.

Ekwunife (1990) defines African Traditional Religion as those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africa which are the result of traditional Africans' response to their believed revealing Superhuman Ultimate and which are rooted from time immemorial in the past African religious culture, beliefs and practices that were transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths, and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings, names and oaths), sacred specialists and persons, sacred space, objects and symbols, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities.

Awolalu (1979) corroborates with Ekwunife when he wrote:

When we speak of African traditional religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature yet it is "written" everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the people's myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped. It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young or old. (p. 26).

African Traditional Religion is therefore a religion that has been with Africans for many generations, and with which they have lived their lives and solved their existential problems from time immemorial. It is a religion that is co-terminus with the African people and their society.

Presently, according to Richard (2013) adherents of African Traditional Religion are around 20% of the total population of Africa which is estimated to be around 760 m. This percentage has been declining since the arrival of Islam and especially Christianity at the beginning of the 20th century. Here below are some general statistics of the different countries. From 50% onwards: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Swaziland, Togo, Zambia, Zimbabwe. From 30% to 49%: Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Congo Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa, Gabon, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. From 10% to 29%: Angola, Gambia, Guinea, Lesotho, Niger, Nigeria, Sao-Tome and Sudan. Less than 10%: Cape Verde, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Senegal, Seychelles and Somalia. However, the influence of ATR goes well beyond these statistics. ATR beliefs and moral values continue to influence, consciously or unconsciously, many Christians and Muslims. Many New Religious Movements have taken over ATR beliefs and moral values.



Figure 1

The illustrations on this map notwithstanding, in areas that have been marked Christian and Muslim, there are still serious traits of African Traditional Religion. As a result of the advent of Christianity and Islam, there has been a sharp decline in adherence to African Traditional Religion. This decline is illustrated by White (1998) in a diagram representing the decline between 1900 through 1970 to 1990.

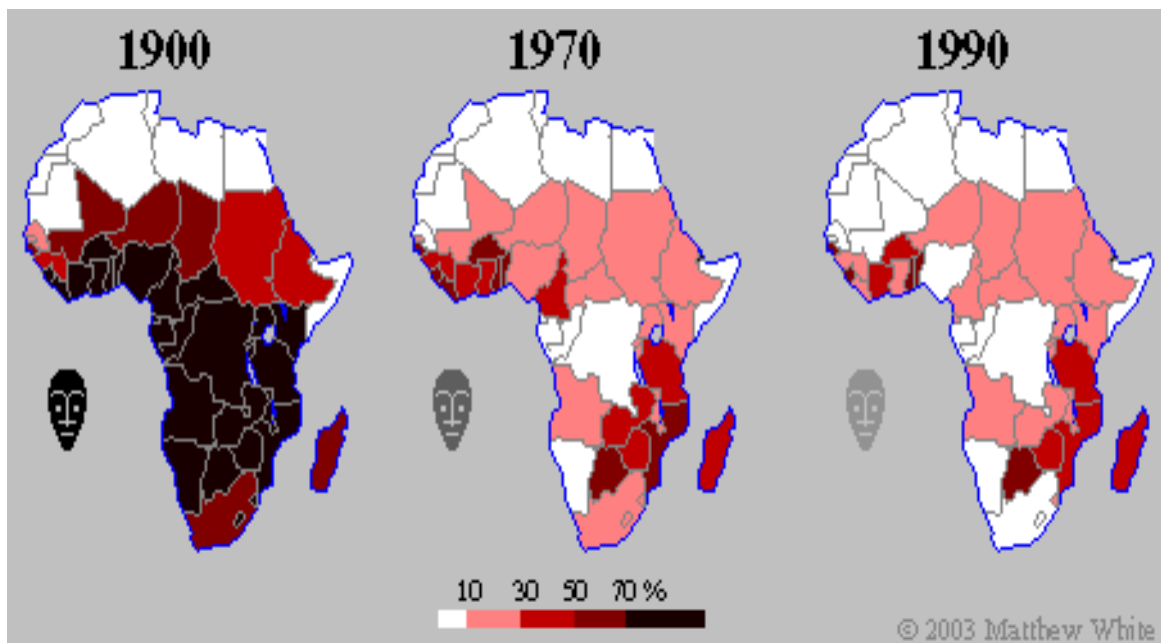


Figure 2

## **5. THE PECULIARITIES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

Awolalu (1976) pointed out the peculiarities of African Traditional Religion. These peculiarities are as follows:

1. It is a religion that is based mainly on oral transmission. It is not written on paper but in peoples' hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions.
2. It has no founders or reformers like Jesus Christ, Gautama the Buddha or Muhammad. It is not the religion of one hero.
3. It has no missionaries, or even the desire to propagate the religion, or to proselytise.
4. However, the adherents are loyal worshippers and, probably because of this, Africans who have their roots in the indigenous religion, find it difficult to sever connection with it.
5. Its propagation is carried out by living it other than by preaching it. Its followers are more preoccupied with its practice than with its theory.

## **6. DEROGATORY CONCEPTS FOR ATR**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the age of racism par excellence. At this time, so many theories and ideas about the nature of man were at cross-roads. This was when Charles Darwin produced his theory on the "origin of species by natural selection" in which he stated that from all variations of life found in the world, nature selects certain of them for survival while others are marked for extinction. According to Ekwunife (2009), it explains the gradual and steady growth of all living organisms from an imperfect amorphous form to the highest organized complicated stage. This idea stunned European/American populace of Darwin's time, and is the alleged rationale for the many evils and harmful practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Although Charles Darwin was not a racist, his biological evolutionary theory was extended to social life, culminating in the white-European civilization (Berge, 1973). The stages of evolution were thought to be related to the innate genetic capabilities of various peoples of the world. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the intellectual climate was agog with this concept and was spread through the writings of many armchair western philosophers, scientists, clergyman, statesmen, anthropologists and sociologists like Joseph-Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, Frazer, Spencer, Tylor, Durkheim, Houston Stuart Chamberlain, Adolf Hitler and name them.

Kanu (2002) avers that though this ideology led to the discovery of various streams like the refreshing waters of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories and techniques, which have enlarged our concept of the human person, this theory has also led to dark waters as some of its effects are degraded morality, religion and traditional family and time-honoured values of mankind. The Darwinian theory swept through Germany in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and sowed in it one of the most heinous manifestations of racism in human history, culminating in the crematoria of death camps in the 1940's here in Europe, the Jews became the victims of genocide based Adolf Hitler's theory of the master race and millions of the Jews were wiped off the face of the earth.

From this perspective, Ekwunife (2009) observes that human societies were graded into three: the primitive with its irrational or illogical thought illustrated in Levy Bruhl's primitive mentality with magical practices and outlook as Frazer speculated. From magical thought and practices, primitive societies graduated into Animistic thinking (Tylor) which soon materialized into Ancestor worship (Spencer) and totemic social practices (Durkheim). With gradual critical reflections, society developed into the metaphysical or philosophical stage with its corresponding democratic and egalitarian social organization as found in Greek city states.

The last stage is the positive or pure scientific stage with its corresponding rule of sociological experts (Pritchard, 1965). Religion for these scholars began with the primitive man's inability to explain, predict and control space time events around him as found in African Traditional Societies, Australian aborigines and Amerindians. This stage later gave way to the form reflected in Greek city states of polytheistic gods. The final stage is the centralized stage where religion took on the form of monotheism. In all, religion appears to be an illusion which man should shade off and outgrow when he matures with scientific thinking and practices. For example in Comte's view (1789 – 1957) human society develops first from theological stage with its corresponding military and hierarchical social organization to metaphysical stage where

philosophers rule the society. The third and highest form is the scientific stage where social life is highly regulated. For Spencer (1800 – 1903) religion passes three stages: Animism (the worship of many different spirits and sacred powers) among primitives through polytheism (found in ancient civilization) to monotheism (of modern civilization). In each case religion takes on the form of the structure of society. It is this smugness toward A.T.R. that generated barrage of names for it. Names like primitive, pagan, heathen, magic, ancestor worshippers, juju, animists, Fetish etc., easily feature in discussions with both the learned and illiterate African.

- i. **Primitive:** Primitive means crude, backward, uncouth, ancient, old-fashioned, outdated etc. The use of the concept in relation to Africa by anthropologists and sociologists has its roots in racial pride and cultural arrogance. It was used by Europeans to describe any culture that does not measure up to their own cultural pattern (Quarcoopome, 1987). To distinctively refer to African Traditional Religion as primitive makes less meaning as all religions have tastes of primitivity.
- ii. **Paganism:** It is a concept employed by sociologists to distinguish between the civilized and uncivilized, polished and unpolished, sophisticated and unsophisticated. It was employed by Europeans to speak of religions outside Christianity and Islam, and sometimes, Islam is included. It covers religions made up of a variety of cults (Franz, 1956) or associated with Magic (Boas, 1961). In the contention of Quarcoopome (1987), it is a term that has been derogatorily imposed on Africans and has a racial undertone.
- iii. **Heathenism:** the use of the word heathen just like others is based on racial and cultural pride. This is better appreciated when we understand the meaning of the word heathen. It is a German word which speaks of wastelands far removed from the town, where undesirable elements have their abode. In relation to African Traditional Religion it speaks of the religion of the unenlightened and unsophisticated.
- iv. **Fetishism:** Etymologically, it is from the Portuguese word *fetico*. It refers to charms and amulets used by the Portuguese. When the Portuguese came to Africa and observed the use of similar objects in their religion, they identified African Traditional Religion with fetishism. However, it was later used to refer to primitive religions based on ignorance and prejudice. African Traditional Religion is not all about charms and amulets. Quarcoopome (1987), avers that the concept is a misuse and abuse of word, and thus inappropriate.
- v. **Idolatry:** it is from the Greek word *eidolon* which means image or shape, usually copied from the real thing. Thus it speaks of what is false compared to the real thing. In relation to African Traditional Religion, it was used, mainly by Christians to speak of it as the worship of false gods. Africans were thus a people who needed to be liberated from their worship of false gods. This served the bases for missionary work in Africa.
- vi. **Animism:** This was a concept invented by the English anthropologist, E. B. Taylor, who first used it in an article he published in 1866, and later in his book on *Primitive Culture* in 1871. It implies the belief in spirits. As in the case where by rivers, trees, rocks, lakes, mountains, junctions, etc. are said to be possessed by spirits. According to Quarcoopome (1987), the belief in spirits is just one of the components of African Traditional Religion, among others, thus, it is incorrect to describe the whole of African Traditional Religion as Animism or as nature worship.
- vii. **Polytheism:** The word describes the belief in many gods. In African Traditional Religion, there are many divinities that serve as the deans or intermediaries of the Supreme Being. These divinities have been misunderstood by many missionaries who understand them in terms of many Gods.
- viii. **Savage:** The word savage means pertaining to the forest or wilderness, wild, uncultured, untamed, violent, brutal, uncivilized, untaught, rude, barbarous, inhuman etc. It is the opposite of civilized. And as regards every culture, religion or people, there is an element of savagery. This should not be made exclusive to Africans (Awolalu, 1976).
- ix. **Juju:** Juju is of a French origin and it means a little doll or toy. Its application to African deities has been perpetuated by English writers. For example, Talbot (1926) in his *Life in Southern Nigeria* devoted three chapters to *Juju* among the Ibibio people and discussed the

various divinities among them. *Juju* is, therefore, one of the misleading and derogatory terms used by investigators out of either sheer prejudice or ignorance (Awolalu, 1976).

- x. **Ancestor Worship:** This is another concept used to speak of African Traditional Religion. It was invented by the anthropologist Herbert Spencer, and first used in his work *Principles of Sociology* in 1885. He taught with the use of this concept that savage people associate the spirit of the dead with certain objects, and keep the spirits in their favour, they offered sacrifices to them. As Mbiti (1970) has observed, it is true that the dead occupy a very significant place in the life of the African, everything they do cannot be reduced to ancestor worship.
- xi. **Magic:** magic is a practice that predates religion, and in fact sociologists like E. Durkheim would refer to magic as the mother of religion. Thus, man having failed to manipulate natural phenomenon through magic now resorted to the belief in God as the source of all power. Many western writers used this concept to describe African Traditional Religion, as still being at the level of magic, and thus does not qualify to be a religion. Although in Africa, religion and magic are hardly separable, religion is not magic and magic cannot explain religion.

Some other concepts that have been used to describe African Traditional Religion include: Magic, Ancestor Worship, Totemism, Naturalism etc. We shall not be going into them as we have done in others.

### 7. THE DIFFICULTIES OF STUDYING AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

1. Africa is a vast continent with many countries, languages, ethnics and complex dialects. As a result, it may be difficult for a researcher to carry out any successful research in all parts of the continent. For instance, in Nigeria, there are three major ethnic groups are: the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani. Apart from the above, there are other minorities with different languages and dialects. As earlier mentioned, God is called *Olodumare* in Yoruba land, the Igbo call him *Chineke*, Edo people refer to him as *Osanobuwa*, Nupe refer to him as *Soko*. The Ijaw call him *Temearau* and Fon and Ewe of Dahomey call God *Nana Buluku* while the Akan of Ghana refer to him as *Odomankoma*. The Mende of Sierra-Leone call him *Ngewo* while the Kono of Sierra-Leone regard him as *Meketa*. In view of the multi-various names of God in West Africa, it may be difficult for a scholar to fully understand the concept of God among these different peoples. This must have probably contributed to some generalizations and wrong conclusions drawn by early investigators on African Traditional Religion.
2. Another major problem in the study of African religion is secrecy. Many African priests, priestesses and other functionaries are not always willing to disclose some aspects of the religion. For example, medicine-men or practitioners of African medicine hardly reveal the ingredients necessary for any effective medicine to an investigator. Thus many of them die with the knowledge, most times acquired from their ancestors.
3. There is also the problem of lack of written records. The custodians of Africa's rich heritage were largely illiterates and therefore incapable of proper documentation for the use and benefit of generations to come. Factors contributed to poor documentation in many African societies: inter-tribal wars, migration and re-settlement, search for food and employment. These factors have affected the culture of the people considerably. At times, some of them could not recount the history of the past accurately.
4. As Awolalu (1976) had rightly indicated, the influence of foreign religions, such as Christianity and Islam has also affected the growth of African Traditional Religion adversely. The two religions in particular have missionary drives by converting the people through some strategies like western education and improved medical facilities. Many African people are more comfortable to be identified with any of the foreign religions than African Traditional Religion, because they are believed to be religions of the enlightened and civilized people of the world.
5. Idowu (1973) also discussed the problems of the consequences of many European settlements that have wiped out aboriginal peoples and obliterated many racial memories.

6. Western education, civil or mercantile service, travelling to various places outside Africa has done unrepairable blow to the study of ATR.

## **8. WHY DO WE NEED TO STUDY AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION?**

A couple of reasons can be advanced for the study of African Traditional Religion, and these include,

1. To find out what Africans actually know, believe and think about Deity and the world.
2. To find out how the African beliefs have inspired the worldviews and moulded cultures in general. This is to help others understand the social and moral behaviour of Africans.
3. To make a scientific comparison of African Traditional Religion with other religions.
4. To give a critical judgement and interpretation of ATR in truth and as practised.
5. To show that the African religious experience is valid, true and real.
6. To help the African reconstruct his past, understand the present and effectively plan for the future.
7. To help the African in his search for self-determination and assertion.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

In spite of the declining numbers of the followers of ATR, there seem to be reasons to conclude that ATR will continue to be a living religion in many years to come. Some of these reasons are the following: ATR continues to be the source of meaning, direction and security of the lives of many Africans, including followers of other well established religious traditions.

In these last few years, there has been a revival in the practice of ATR in different parts of Africa. Today, as the spirit of religious intolerance is being replaced slowly by the spirit of interreligious tolerance, dialogue and mutual respect, ATR is also slowly finding its place in the orchestra of the world religions. Through its spiritual and moral values: profound sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the Creator and of the spiritual world; importance of family life, love and respect of life, sense of solidarity and community life etc., John Paul II (1995) avers that it has been recognised as part of the religious and moral patrimony for humankind. This tolerant and respectful atmosphere has given confidence and self-esteem to the followers of ATR. Many are no longer ashamed of their religious heritage, as they had been in the past. They are proud of being its heirs and consider it their duty and right to pass it on to the next generation.

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