

**CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

**TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE**

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**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis aims to legitimize the study and practice of Traditional African Spirituality as a core field of study at the Chicago Theological Seminary. It is a call to resurrect Traditional African Spirituality as an authentic spiritual construct and a retelling of religious history to dispel the myth that it is not worthy of academic study. This thesis provides valuable insights into the problem of identity and perception that has caused theological institutions to evade African Theology—perceived as unacceptable and unappealing—thus preventing it from crossing academic boundaries as a field of study worthy of research, ministry, and scholarship. This work advocates for the Chicago Theological Seminary to engage in radical intellectual transformation by extending the borders of Religious Studies beyond Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and, more recently, Buddhism and Hinduism to include Traditional African Spirituality as a serious academic field of study. It presents ten successful African Spirituality programs across the United States offered at higher-learning institutions. It also presents a high-level analysis of alternatives (an analytical comparison tool) that uses adjectival rating rationale against evaluation criteria to assess the viability and benefits of implementing Traditional African Spirituality as a new discipline. This assessment projects that implementing Traditional African Spirituality will exceed performance expectations and revolutionize the study of theology at the Chicago Theological Seminary. This research proves that it is time to remove the stigma and allow African Theology to cross academic borders. It

deserves a seat at the table; without it, the study of religion at the Chicago Theological Seminary is incomplete and void of its true power.

To my African consciousness, mwalimu (teachers), Anthony Browder,  
Professor James Small and Nana Dr. Patricia Newton.

# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	vi
DEDICATION .....	iv
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	vi
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2. WHAT IS TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY? .....	6
2.1 The History of Traditional African Spirituality .....	6
2.2 Traditional African Spirituality as a Religion Across the Diaspora .....	10
2.3 Dispelling Misconceptions of Traditional African Spirituality .....	13
CHAPTER 3. TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE.....	19
3.1 African Spirituality as an Interdisciplinary Approach (Coexistence) .....	19
3.2 Traditional African Spirituality Programs Offered in Academia .....	28
3.3 Why Should Traditional African Spirituality be an Academic Discipline? .....	34
CHAPTER 4. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION .....	37
4.1 Launching Traditional African Spirituality as a New Program .....	38
4.2 Next Steps and Thesis Recommendation.....	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	54

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Table 4. 1. Ratings and Rationale</i> .....	41
<i>Table 4. 2. High-level Assessment Results</i> .....	42





CHAPTER 1.  
INTRODUCTION

*Traditional African religions deserve the same respect as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.*

*~Dr. John Mbiti.*

I experience bouts of spiritual depression because I often hear, *you are not my equal* when Traditional African Spirituality is compared to other traditional religions, namely, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. This started in 2000 after my first semester in an MDiv program at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), studying with amazing womanist scholars like Dr. Delores Carpenter and Dr. Cheryl Sanders. The first day of orientation was electrifying. The Dean came in to greet us—I'll never forget his words—*“this is a Christian divinity school—our job is to take Jesus away from you based on a range of theological study, but it will be your job to pick Jesus back up if you decide to do so.”* I knew this would be one of those divine moments.

My studies were interrupted that summer by an innocent trip to Egypt (Kemet) with African studies scholar Anthony (Tony) Browder. We studied Nile Valley history and spirituality. I learned that much of what I thought were facts about the Bible were myths. I remember walking up the ascending gallery in the great pyramid on a narrow stairway in a dark passageway. We navigated the space as we shared the stairway, with one group coming down while we pressed our way to the top. A sister in my group offered a prophetic word as we pushed forward, saying that this was like going through the birth canal. That was my ah-ha moment—I felt the beginning of really knowing

myself—the beginning of a transformation that my friend would later coin the term “Kem metamorphosis” to describe this spiritual awakening like the metamorphosis of a butterfly that many of us experienced on this trip to Kemet.

When I returned from Kemet, I was living in a spiritual dualism. The Dean’s words were indelibly etched in my spirit—I couldn’t pick Jesus back up, but I couldn’t completely walk away. If I continued to embrace the Christian god, I felt like I was violating an African spiritual ethics code. In that case, it felt like I was engaging in spiritual sharecropping, like working on someone else’s religion, knowing it would never be my own. I decided to end my spiritual delusion and leave divinity school to learn independently after determining that African spirituality was not included in the range of theological studies offered at this HBCU seminary school. African spirituality was like a pit in the core of my soul, trying to make its way out. I spent the rest of the summer studying African spirituality with African studies scholar Professor James Small.

So, 20 years later, in 2020, I sensed it was time to return to divinity school, but this time at the Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS), as I continued to search for answers in a dualism of having to select religious fact or fiction or hybridity of faith traditions or assimilation or none of the above. I still wrestle with that voice that disparages my Traditional African Spiritual roots, saying—*you are not my equal*. This is what I still hear today, in 2023, as I sit in classes at CTS with little representation and little voice to advocate for the religion of my ancestors. How do we decolonize academia so we can course-correct the study of theology? How do we address spiritual depression, spiritual anemia, and spiritual insecurity when African spiritual practices are ignored? I left an HBCU 20 years ago because while it addressed my Black Churchness and Black

Womanist self, it failed to feed my African self spiritually. This left me feeling spiritually insecure and out of balance. Twenty years later, not much has changed in the academic field of theology at many higher learning institutions; I still hear that voice—*you are not my equal*.

While the academy has not changed, I have grown up a bit and am ready to silence that voice. I am fighting for a religion I do not know personally, but my spirit knows well. My soul calls for the re-Africanization of spirituality as an authentic spiritual construct. Today I can channel the voice of the great revolutionary, liberatory, and decolonizationist Frantz Fanon, who said, “The famous dictum which states that all men are equal will find its illustration in the colonies only when the colonized subject states he is equal to the colonist. Taking it further, he is determined to fight to be more than the colonist.”<sup>1</sup>

This is, therefore, a call to decolonize Traditional African Spirituality that has moreover historically been absent from theological institutions. We have relegated it to the back of the line, silenced, overlooked, and discarded, making it an invisible religion for the global community. One might even say that Traditional African Spirituality has become the oppressed and marginalized religiosity of the field of Religious Studies as the “not chosen” religion. As a silent voice, African spirituality has been in crisis because of misperceptions rooted in racism, white supremacy, superstition, and fear-based religions. This stigma of spiritual inferiority has resulted in Traditional African Spirituality being

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 9.

unrepresented, underrepresented, ignored, devalued, denigrated, and demonized as a symbol of evil and dark magic.

This problem of identity and perception has caused theological institutions to evade African spirituality—perceived as unacceptable and unappealing—thus preventing it from crossing educational boundaries as a field of study worthy of research, ministry, and scholarship. This thesis calls us to continue the radical transformative work that the brilliant scholar Cheikh Anta Diop proposed when he called us to focus on the unrecognized and forgotten Africa and her remarkable legacy. He urged us to rescue, reconstruct, and “revivify African culture to produce a truly African paradigm of what humans ought to be and become.” His call to action was originally about ancient Egypt, but it applies to African studies and African spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

Peter Paris also senses the call to academic transformation, saying,

recent decades have witnessed a virtual revolution in the traditional modes of academic scholarship in the humanities. Various conditions that originated a generation ago brought about this radical change. At that time, the predominantly white-male-controlled universities in the United States (and elsewhere) were pressed to open their doors to admit increasing numbers of African Americans, various other ethnic minorities, and white women as students, teachers, and administrators. These nascent changes in admission and hiring policies marked the beginning of a new era in the academic world...for all groups of people.<sup>3</sup>

This analysis, therefore, calls us to engage in the next wave of academic revolution by extending the borders of religious studies at CTS beyond Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and, more recently, Buddhism and Hinduism to include Traditional African Spirituality as a serious academic field of study. A new academic program in

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<sup>2</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Selections from the Husia: Sacred Wisdom of Ancient Egypt* (Los Angeles: The University of Sankore Press, 1989), xi.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1-2.

Traditional African Spirituality will further CTS' legacy of interreligious engagement, sensitivity, diversity, and inclusion to introduce the greatness of Traditional African Spirituality to a broader global academic audience.

The knowledge of Traditional African Spirituality will offer several benefits to academic discourse. Such knowledge will reintroduce concepts that academia has overlooked, challenge traditional methods and scholarship, validate Traditional African Spirituality as a valuable academic field worthy of high-quality scholarship, and open opportunities for other marginalized spiritual constructs.<sup>4</sup>

Theological gatekeepers like CTS must, therefore, honestly assess the religious history and spiritual constructs, look around the table to identify who is excluded, ask why, and then pull up a chair. This thesis is a call to decolonize the study of theology, focus on this critical yet forgotten spiritual construct, and retelling of religious history to dispel the myths and legitimize the study and practice of African spirituality as a dominant and equal spiritual construct. It will also create opportunities to establish CTS as an African spirituality advocate and intellectual center of excellence dedicated to the study, research, ministry, and scholarship of African spirituality across the diaspora.

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<sup>4</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 2-29.

## CHAPTER 2.

### WHAT IS TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY?

*God described in the Bible is the same God already known in the framework of traditional African religiosity.*

*~Dr. John Mbiti.*

This chapter promotes the profound legacy of Traditional African Spirituality. It examines its rich history and god concepts, traces its influences and commonalities, explores African religions across the diaspora, and dispels common myths and misconceptions to restore Traditional African Spirituality's spiritual identity and credibility as a sacred religion for communion with the Divine.

#### **2.1 The History of Traditional African Spirituality**

A common mistake is to orient discussions of African spirituality against the backdrop of the Transatlantic slave trade. While colonization and slavery have had a traumatic impact, Traditional African Spirituality has its own rich history detailed below, apart from the history the oppressor levied against it.

Africa is the second largest continent, with 17% of the global population. While disputed, we consider it the birthplace of humanity and one of the oldest spiritual constructs dating back to approximately 200,000-100,000 BCE. Stacey Floyd-Thomas defines Traditional African Spirituality as a “wide range of spiritual and cosmological

beliefs and sacred ritual practices shared by most pre-colonial African societies.”<sup>1</sup>

Traditional African spirituality claims find corroboration in oral history, myths, archaeology, carbon dating, and DNA evidence.<sup>2</sup>

We often segment Traditional African Spirituality across African regions and ethnic groups. Dr. Olupona said indigenous religions in Africa are informed by their ethnic identity.<sup>3</sup> Some of the more dominant ethnic or ethnolinguistic groups that frame indigenous African religious systems include—Abaluhya (Kenya), Asante (Akan - West Africa), Baganda (Uganda), Bambara (Mali), Ba Kongo (Congo and Angola), Ba Thonga (southern African countries of Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, and South Africa), Buganda (East Africa), Dagara (Niger region of western Africa), Dahomey (West Africa), Edo (Nigeria), Ewe (Ghana), Fang (west-central Africa), Fon (Benin), Igbo (Nigeria), Kaguru (Tanzania), Lupupa (Congo), Manyika (southern African countries of Zimbabwe and Mozambique), Masai (Tanzania and Kenya), Yoruba (Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana), and Zulu (South Africa). Africa, therefore, does not espouse a single religious belief system. However, the overlapping of Africa’s land mass and the movement of people across the continent has resulted in commonalities that unite spiritual practices across various ethnic groups. Scholar Ali Mazrui describes this as the “hybridity of African culture.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Juan Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 227.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, “African Traditional Religions,” *Encyclopedias.com*, 2024, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-traditional-religions>.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Chiorazzi, “The Spirituality of Africa,” *The Harvard Gazette*, October 6, 2015, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa>.

<sup>4</sup> Moradewun Adejunmobi, Omoniyi Afolabi, and Pdraig R. Carmody, “Africa,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47721>.

Unlike other religions, practitioners find the pluralistic nature of Traditional African Spirituality makes it a welcoming and refreshing form of worship because it can be easily integrated with other religions, along with the spiritual structure of the collective experiences of a religion Paris believes originated in Africa.<sup>5</sup> Paris and John Mbiti (considered the Kenyan dean of African theologians) also argue that scholars “generally” agree that Traditional African Spirituality has the following attributes that make it a unique and appealing path to the Divine. Traditional African Spirituality: (1) explains the nature of the world and the meaning of life;<sup>6</sup> (2) has discerning, intuitive, and predictive features;<sup>7</sup> (3) practitioners believe God created the universe and everything in it;<sup>8</sup> (4) practitioners believe in other supernatural spirits, such as ancestors; (5) practitioners believe that Africans are themselves the religion “wherever the African is, there is religion;”<sup>9</sup> (6) is not just a religion; it is a knowledge system that is scientifically based;<sup>10</sup> (7) practitioners view God as a single “self-existent supreme deity” who is the primary power, thus rejecting polytheism. Mbiti asserts that the God described in the Bible is the same God already known in the framework of traditional African religiosity;<sup>11</sup> (8) practitioners believe in a covenantal relationship with God operating in the spirit of reciprocity.<sup>12</sup> (9) practitioners believe community and family are sacred,

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<sup>5</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Raboteau, *Canaan Land*, 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Raboteau, *Canaan Land*, 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 27-28, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Obafemi Jegede, “Science and African Culture,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, eds. F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.48028>.

<sup>11</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 28-29, 35, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 44.



“created by the supreme God, protected by the divinities, and governed by the ancestral spirits;”<sup>13</sup> (10) promotes the importance of maintaining personhood through others;<sup>14</sup> (11) espouses a spirit of tolerance towards different worldviews, philosophies, and religions; thus, there is no claim to absolute truth;<sup>15</sup> (12) practitioners believe ethics is the fruit of religion;<sup>16</sup> (13) practitioners believe social order and peace are essential and sacred;<sup>17</sup> (14) practitioners believe life only has meaning through its relationship to the Deity;<sup>18</sup> and (15) practitioners believe that physical and spiritual worlds are not independent but are complementary, where ancestors play a crucial role.<sup>19</sup>

However, Traditional African Spirituality is no longer a dominant religion in Africa. Over time, through conquests, invasions, domination, colonization, mission work, and imperialism, the most practiced religions in Africa are Christianity (~40%) and Islam (~40%), with their special status as “people of the book.” These religions have virtually replaced Traditional African Religions, which comprise approximately 10% of religious practices. While the spread of Christianity pillaged the continent, its people, and its traditional religions, some of the most important Christian theologians are African: Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Athanasius, and Cyprian of Carthage all shaped Christian theology and the orthodoxy.

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<sup>13</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 51, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 101-114.

<sup>15</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Obafemi Jegede, “Ethics,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, eds. F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47850>.

<sup>17</sup> Jegede, “Ethics.”

<sup>18</sup> Jegede, “Ethics.”

<sup>19</sup> Jegede, “Ethics.”

However, Africans often fused Traditional African Religions with Christianity and Islam by assimilating them into African culture through syncretism. Syncretism for enslaved Africans across the diaspora is the “fusion, blending, or connection of different religious, linguistic, or cultural elements” resulting from African people's forced migration from the Transatlantic slave trade across the diaspora that spread across the Americas, Caribbean, and Europe.<sup>20</sup> The enslaved brought their indigenous African belief systems and religious practices with them, giving birth to cross-cultural African-influenced religions such as Santeria, Vodou and Hoodoo, Umbanda, Candomblé, Ifa, Obeah, Myalism, Yoruban Orisha, the cult of *Osisi* and *Omolu*, Rastafarianism, and re-birthed deities.<sup>21</sup>

## **2.2 Traditional African Spirituality as a Religion Across the Diaspora**

Approximately 13 million Africans endured enslavement during the Transatlantic slave trade. The Middle Passage and enslavement were among the most brutal atrocities in history that destabilized and displaced African societies, whose debilitating effects have stayed in the collective memory of Black people today.<sup>22</sup> Dr. Patricia Newton captures the impact of the slave trade in her revolutionary scientific study on Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a term she trademarked to explain the impact of how repeated trauma experienced by Africans during the 400 years of slavery, terrorism, and oppression, was passed down through generations and affected the mental,

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<sup>20</sup> *Encyclopedia.com*, s.v. “African Traditional Religions,” <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-traditional-religions>.

<sup>21</sup> Erik Kjeldgaard, “Religion and the African Diaspora,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.48015>.

<sup>22</sup> Abiola F. Irele and Saheed Aderinto, “Black Diaspora,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47777>.

physical, and spiritual health of people of African descent. Through the initial trauma of this anti-African evil, Black people unintentionally absorbed these negative values, images, and expectations that resulted in the disturbance of peace and disrupted divine spiritual order. Dr. Newton posits that if the lens of the mind is cloudy and constantly under trauma, the lens through which people of African descent see God can result in a dysfunctional spirituality.<sup>23</sup>

Even with the brutality of the *Maafa* (the Africa holocaust), some things are too deep to forget, remaining entrenched in the soul and spirit as a witness to the resilience of African people. Despite the brutality of the *Maafa*, enslaved Africans maintained “fragments” of their own religious systems and sense of community and self through generations, even though more dominant features of their religions were lost. Floyd-Thomas calls this process of remembering “African Carryovers,” defined as “cultural practices, idiomatic language, and worldviews existing within African diaspora communities that have either explicit or implicit origins in the practices and traditions of African tribal or regional cultures.”<sup>24</sup>

A white Jewish anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits supports Floyd-Thomas’s African Carryovers assertions, stating it extended across the African diaspora into alternative forms and influences of spirituality labeled ‘Africanisms’ that included spiritual diversity through acculturation and contemporary inter-religious practices. Africanism inspired divination, magic, conjuring, spirit possession, ring shout, call and response, and river baptism. It also gave birth to cross-cultural African-influenced

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<sup>23</sup> Patricia Newton, “Neurology of Black Consciousness,” (unpublished video, Institute of Karmic Guidance, 2019), MP3.

<sup>24</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 227-258.

religions. However, groups like *Zantray* and the *Bode National* in Haiti and the Orisha movement in Trinidad retained purely African belief systems and practices.<sup>25</sup>

The African diaspora describes the dispersion of millions of Africans because of 400 years of slavery starting in the mid-fifteenth century that concentrated in the Caribbean, North America, South America (Latin America), and Europe and extended globally. While most people in the diaspora practice mainstream religions, Traditional African Spirituality integrated more with Christianity than with Islamic traditions in the Americas “although some Africans who came to the Americas during the slave trade appear to have been Muslims, Islam does not appear to have had a strong impact on the Americas until more recently,”<sup>26</sup> specifically during the Black consciousness movement.

However, variations of Traditional African Spirituality appear across the diaspora based on its acceptance in the dominant white culture. Victor Anderson coined the term “Ontological Blackness,” which describes the blackness that whiteness creates wherein Black identity is limited by how it is perceived such that it can be accepted by the white, dominant culture or assimilation is forced upon blackness to “attain social order...that insists Black people accommodate or measure up to the expectations of the prevalent white culture.”<sup>27</sup> These are some limitations that Traditional African Spirituality had to endure to escape extinction.

Notwithstanding, many agree that the Carryover phenomena of African-derived or African-influenced religions continue to exist in various forms, influencing the Pan-African movement that continues today, as people of African descent continue to

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<sup>25</sup> Kjeldgaard, “Religion and the African Diaspora.”

<sup>26</sup> Kjeldgaard, “Religion and the African Diaspora.”

<sup>27</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 227-258.

influence religious and social practices across the diaspora through radical political and social justice movements and possibly towards an African Renaissance.<sup>28</sup>

### **2.3 Dispelling Misconceptions of Traditional African Spirituality**

Traditional African Spirituality has evolved as a spiritual phenomenon. African religious scholars like Mbiti promote the profound legacy of African spirituality. Renowned Black consciousness scholars like Cheikh Anta Diop, John Henrik Clarke, Yosef Ben-Jochannan, John Jackson, Dr. Asa Hilliard, and Anthony Browder supported his work. They all promote the African origins of civilization and spirituality traced to the ancient Nile Valley Egypt, Ethiopia, and West Africa as models of spirituality—to promote academic scholarship and recognition for African accomplishments.<sup>29</sup>

Today, we practice African spirituality in near obscurity, partly because of syncretism and acculturation but also through fear, misinformation, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations, in attempts to protect the reputation of the divine in other religions or protect dominant white cultural interests. All these factors have resulted in Traditional African Spirituality keeping its marginalized status in the hierarchy of religious constructs, targeted for miseducation, under-education, and non-education in religious scholarship. This section identifies common myths of Traditional African Spirituality to re-educate, reclaim, and elevate its status in academia.

Muslim and European scholars primarily conducted academic research in the 18<sup>th</sup>—early 20<sup>th</sup> century who supported colonist governments seeking to maintain

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<sup>28</sup> John Herschel Barnhill, “African Diaspora,” *The Encyclopedia of African American History: 1896 to the Present*, December 1, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.45185>.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Browder, *Nile Valley Contributions to Civilization: Exploding the Myths*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: IKG, 1992), 23, 37, 48-49, 149-151, 190.

dominance, power, and control over Africa and its resources by branding African spiritual practices with negative stereotypes and criticisms—as primitive, savage, backward, demonic, and witchcraft. They used the absence of sacred texts as the basis of their claims compared to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This continues to be a source of conflict, as the white-dominant culture still labels Traditional African practices as an inferior religion and reduces the legitimacy of African and African-inspired spiritual practices.

Dr. Darnise Martin addresses Black Christians in an article, asking them not to demonize or be afraid to learn about African spirituality, espousing their life-giving and sustaining qualities found, for example, in the rich ritual traditions of Benin, Congo, Angola, Nigeria, Sudan, and Ethiopia.<sup>30</sup> While some readers received her work well, others were deeply critical of African spirituality, critiquing it as dangerous, sinful, and nonsensical. Some anonymous responses left in the comments section for this online opinion piece include: “There is either Christian or heathen—no in between;” “Sorry, but our European ancestors also had to repudiate their pagan idols and the demonic influences attached to them to follow Christ. No race gets an idolatry pass;” “You cannot honor your ancestors, wear *eleke* beads, do yoga, get a spiritual reading from a *mambo* or *Babalawo*. Sure, you can; you are an ex-Christian;” “There is a reason why idolatrous practices are forbidden by the Law in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and it ain’t because all three are trying to hold blacks down.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Darnise Martin, “Black Christians, Don’t Demonize African Spirituality,” *Religious News Service*, January 5, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/01/05/black-christians-dont-demonize-african-spirituality/>.

<sup>31</sup> Martin, “Black Christians, Don’t Demonize African Spirituality.”

According to Baum, to regard Traditional African Spirituality and its God concepts as lacking credibility while authenticating and elevating mainstream religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) as legitimate and genuine god-ordained theologies is flawed scholarship that has no basis.<sup>32</sup> There is also a misinterpretation and misapplication of African-influenced spiritual practices and the inability to see commonalities between mainstream religious practices and African spiritual practices. For example, mislabeling traditional African religions and practices as witchcraft and black magic is a stereotype derived from elitist Western colonialist mentalities.<sup>33</sup> Oladosu Afis also emphasized the attacks on Traditional African Spirituality because of Neocolonialism in post-World War II, which describes the “continued activities of the United States and the former colonizing powers of Europe in Third World countries, especially in Africa”<sup>34</sup> to exploit them to keep economic, cultural, as well as spiritual dominance by assigning and perpetuating labels of inferiority and dependency while labeling mainstream religions as superior and dominant. These are all tropes used to minimize and invalidate African spirituality. This is an example of racism under the guise of scientific scholarship that uses “intellectual, anthropological, political, linguistic, and literary approaches”<sup>35</sup> to perpetuate biases and justify racist attacks against African

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Baum, “African Religions: An Interpretation,” *Africana: The Encyclopedia of African and African American Experience*, December 1, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.39882>.

<sup>33</sup> Gerdes Fleurant and Claudine Michel, “Voudou: Africana,” *The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, December 1, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.43785>.

<sup>34</sup> Oyekemi Oyelakin, “Neocolonialism,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47970>

<sup>35</sup> Oladosu Afis, “Race,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.48009>.

contributions and achievements in civilization, culture, and religion purely based on race and ethnicity.

To counter the tradition of scholarship that portrays African cultures from a perspective that is biased and racist, African scholars have sought to rectify the historical record by correcting misconceived views and offering compelling critiques to support African scholarship. Scholars like Mbiti promote the profound legacy of African spirituality, while Black consciousness scholars promote academic scholarship and recognition for African accomplishments.<sup>36</sup> Also, Jewish anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits also conducted scholarly work promoting Africa, emphasizing its relevance to African American culture and progress. Herskovits successfully linked African American culture with Africanisms, or African culture.”<sup>37</sup>

There is also a misconception about the significance of oral tradition in African spirituality, thus invalidating them as sacred religions as opposed to the written sacred text found in the Tanakh, Bible, and the Quran that codify and preserve these so-called respectable religions 'god concepts. Scholars of Black religions and African theologians, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, to name one, have tried to argue for the recovery of oral traditions as a religious dimension that's important not just in understanding African religions but also in thinking about Christian theology in Africa.<sup>38</sup> In response to this claim, John Collins asserts that the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) is not a pure text, stating that it has also

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Wilson and David Addams, “Afrocentrism,” *The Encyclopedia of African American History: 1896 to the Present*, December 1, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.45188>.

<sup>37</sup> John Burdick, “Religions: African,” in “Latin America and the Caribbean: Examination of how African spiritual roots and New World experiences shaped Vodou, Santería, and Umbanda,” *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, December 1, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.43108>.

<sup>38</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 105, 207-208.



undergone syncretism and acculturation. He questions its historical claims if we view it from a historical perspective. From Genesis to the patriarchs, Moses and biblical authority, the Exodus, and the characters King Saul, David, and Solomon, little extra-biblical or physical evidence supports that the Hebrew Bible is a historical narrative. Some scholars have questioned the historical claims of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), describing the period of the Hebrews as mythology, folktales, and legends, not facts or historical accounts, but has been composed over time, resulting in gaps and inconsistencies.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, Collins, Knight, and Levine, believe that the Hebrew Bible contains cross-cultural spiritual and cultural influences from African and Near Eastern nations. It incorporated sacred ancestral practices from these nations into the Hebrew religion, described as parallels found in rituals, customs, laws, symbolism, and wisdom practices the Hebrews adopted as their own. Scholars have validated that “Israel was a late arrival on the stage of near Eastern history. The great civilizations of Egypt (African) and Mesopotamia had already flourished for a millennium and a half before the tribes of Israel appeared on the scene.”<sup>40</sup>

Also, according to Knight and Levine, the Bible results from stories passed down orally from generation to generation from the tribes of Israel, people that joined them, resident aliens, and traveling merchants—told stories that were edited into the Bible.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, many of the laws in the Bible are from neighboring cultures, like African codes that predate the Hebrews and influence the Hebrew laws. For example, there are

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<sup>39</sup> John Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2018), 11.

<sup>40</sup> Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Douglas Knight and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), 68.

parallels between the 42 admonitions of Maat (African/Egyptian) written about 1,500 years before the Ten Commandments and the Code of Hammurabi (Babylonian/Mesopotamia) that parallel Moses and the Hebrew god.<sup>42</sup>

Black Consciousness Egyptologist Anthony Browder attests to the power of myths, saying, “since the beginning of time, myths played a powerful role in the formation of institutions and shaping the beliefs, customs, and religious rites of humans...with the power to liberate the mind and guide the soul along a spiritual path of human potential.” this is evidence that written sacred text is not a basis for being a pure text. Written text is only as authentic or inauthentic as oral traditions found in Traditional African Spirituality. Both have room for fallibility and errancy; neither can claim divine dominance or superiority. Therefore, one should recognize their value rather than demonize Traditional African Spirituality for its oral traditions and mythology.<sup>43</sup>

The purity of a text, oral tradition, and mythology does not determine the authenticity and acceptability of spiritual constructs. Stacy Floyd-Thomas said that retelling stories is crucial, mainly when there is a deliberate destruction of African identity and rewriting of history to maintain dominance.<sup>44</sup> However, setting the record straight about Traditional African Spirituality will dispel myths and misconceptions, demystify oppressed religions like it, and uncover their genuine history and power. It is, therefore, time to retell all spiritual histories through the lens of all religions and not the lens of privileged, dominant religions.

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<sup>42</sup> Browder, *Nile Valley Contributions to Civilization*, 90-93; and Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 85-86.

<sup>43</sup> Browder, *Nile Valley Contributions to Civilization*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies*, 105, 207-208.

## CHAPTER 3.

### TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

*We must promote the profound legacy of African spirituality.*

*~Dr. John Mbiti.*

One of the principal aims of this paper is to reclaim Traditional African Spirituality as a legitimate form of theology. This section discusses how African Spirituality has been studied historically as an interdisciplinary approach, identifies how Traditional African Spirituality is taught today in higher-level academia by presenting examples of ten successful African Spirituality programs in the United States, and offers some benefits of establishing Traditional African Theology as a core discipline of academic programs.

#### **3.1 African Spirituality as an Interdisciplinary Approach (Coexistence)**

A major misconception is that African Spirituality is intellectual property that has yet to be claimed. However, after broadening the lens of research in Western academic scholarship, it is apparent that African Spirituality hides in plain sight, coexisting or occupying the same space as more dominant academic disciplines yet operating in the shadows. Academia includes African Spirituality in some capacity, primarily in four fields of study: Anthropology, Philosophy, Religion (specifically Black Religion), and History (specifically Africana Studies and Afrocentrism). Researchers have rarely

recognized African Spirituality as a significant field of study in these discipline but have included it as a non-primary concentration.

This interdisciplinary approach to African Spirituality captured in Anthropology, Philosophy, Religion (specifically Black Religion), and History (specifically Africana Studies and Afrocentrism) presented below has its merits. Still, it fails to maintain the integrity of African religions. There are several reasons for this; other disciplines often misunderstand African spirituality because the nature of African Spirituality has foundational concepts that blur distinctions (for example, between god and science and between history and culture). Additionally, certain concepts that Western thought compartmentalizes bleed into the same concept when approaching an understanding of ways of being and knowing the Divine from an African perspective. We must therefore establish more non-dependent approaches to studying African Spirituality.

### 3.1.1. Anthropology and African Spirituality

Anthropology is a field of science that studies humanity, seeking to know or understand people and their culture. However, traditionally Africa and African Spirituality have not been considered worthy of serious scientific research because, as Dr. Charles Oafemi Jegede explains, they falsely perceived Africa as being without a

specific knowledge system, cosmology, and void of history and culture that addresses issues of reality and creation, truth value, and meaning...[that] marginalized African understanding of science; it is as if Africans have nothing to contribute to global scientific advancement. Both the marginalization of local knowledge systems and the devaluation of culture-specific dimensions of science have deprived modern science of a rich source of understanding.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Obafemi Jegede, "Science and African Culture," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, eds. F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.48028>.

Jegede insists that the connection between African cosmology (the blend of mysticism and physicality) and the African conception of science must be established through African spiritual knowledge centers or wisdom schools that contrast with the dominant Western ideal. Africans connect African cosmology, a blend of mysticism and physicality, to the African understanding of science through African spiritual knowledge centers, intertwining the physical and metaphysical aspects of the cosmos with the spiritual essence of the people. African thinkers bridge the physical and spiritual realms to understand science; thus, science and religion stand in harmony.

This contradicts Western science, which is the assumed model because of imperialism. Western science interprets the African view as irrational, inherently spiritual, and thus non-scientific. We must explore this African scientific way of being and knowing that exists in the transcendental world of spiritual realities to establish and intellectualize African spirituality as an academic discipline.

### 3.1.2. Philosophy and African Spirituality

Philosophy is defined as articulating concepts on the meaning and purpose of life among people and societies. It searches for wisdom found in epistemology, aesthetics, metaphysics, codes of ethics, cosmology, and theology. Because philosophy in the West is governed and normalized by colonialism, philosophy, as an academic discipline, does not value people of African descent because they are thought to have “developed and expressed no articulate thought worthy of being considered instances of philosophy.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Brandon Lundy, Kasereka Kavwahirehi, Lucius T. Outlaw, Safro Kwame, Sanya Osha, and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, “Philosophy,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47996>.

Brandon Lund et al. refers to this as a blatant disrespect and denial of the humanity of African people who interpret African spirituality as the foundation of African-centered philosophy. He said that people of African descent—specifically African Americans—have always had to philosophize about fundamental human concerns in the struggle for religious concepts, identity, survival, freedom, and justice.<sup>3</sup>

Lundy et al. point to the history of African philosophers grounded in and inspired by African and African American spiritual practices, including Black Nationalist philosophers like Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey and the Harlem renaissance intellectuals and leaders and influencers who have advanced the Black intellectual consciousness movement and Black agenda; as well as Dr. King and Malcolm X, who drew inspiration from the philosophies of Black religions and spiritual practices. The Black Nationalist movement and the great migration saw the connectedness of philosophy and spirituality. This connectedness inspired scholars of African descent like Senegalese scientist, scholar, and activist Cheikh Anta Diop who entered the field of science and “academic philosophy determined to work to identify and to forge philosophical traditions, literature, and practices distinctive of black peoples.”<sup>4</sup> Diop also posits that Ancient Egypt was a vital component of an African cultural and spiritual renaissance resulting in ethnophilosophy, which studies indigenous philosophical systems.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, new intellectual energy and collaboration across institutions and disciplines created Afrocentric agendas and methods of thought, resulting in a broader

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<sup>3</sup> Lundy, et al., “Philosophy.”

<sup>4</sup> Lundy, et al., “Philosophy.”

<sup>5</sup> Lundy, et al., “Philosophy.”

view of philosophy by studying African-centered philosophy that included meta-philosophical, historical, geographic implications, and African spirituality from an African lens. This led to systematically studying African history, culture, and spirituality in ancient Egyptian Nile Valley civilizations. Other research “dissolved into the Middle East as a result of commerce, war, evangelism, slavery, colonialism, and imperialism resulting in the elimination and acculturation of African spirituality.”<sup>6</sup> They also studied African spirituality as a part of the ethnophilosophy movement established by African philosophers John Mbiti, Alexis Kagame, and Vincent Mulago, who sought to identify philosophies in belief and knowledge manifested in the thoughts and actions of African culture. They sought to legitimize African culture and spirituality by placing it in its purest form, calling for decolonization from Western ideals.<sup>7</sup>

The image of a decolonized philosophical system is served by the consistent and explicit assertion or demonstration of how African beliefs and knowledge, whether in religion, political organization, or moral systems, contrast with their Western counterparts...in precolonial African cultures and asserts that in them there are unified and uniquely African ideas of value and conceptualizations of reality generally, which account for or form the basis of, the beliefs and practices of African peoples.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.1.3. History-Afrocentrism and African Spirituality

Being Afrocentric means having pride in and expressing African culture in one’s lifestyle. “Advocates for Afrocentric thought and practice advance and promote revisionist socio-historical narratives”<sup>9</sup> that oppose Euro-western biases permeating

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<sup>6</sup> Lundy, et al., “Philosophy.”

<sup>7</sup> Dismas A. Masolo, “Ethnophilosophy,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47854>.

<sup>8</sup> Masolo, “Ethnophilosophy.”

<sup>9</sup> Kwame Zulu Shabazz, “Afrocentrism,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47729>.

throughout the culture. Afrocentrism developed academic and grassroots scholars that formed the Black consciousness movement. It began as a new intellectual and spiritual movement that openly challenged academia and brought academia to the streets (public), establishing small grassroots Black consciousness academic circles in Black communities. Consciousness leaders sought to re-cultivate people of African descent to the best of African history, culture, and spirituality by re-centering the “African minds and ways of knowing because of European colonization to encourage liberation and transformation of African people.”<sup>10</sup>

Afrocentrism taught spiritual practices that were counter to mainstream religions as they sought to decolonize spirituality, exposing spiritual truths that examined the African presence in the Bible, parallels between African spirituality and Christianity, and questioned the accuracy of Christian truths and beliefs as a viable religious construct for people of African descent. Some left the black church, while others advocated for change within religious institutions.

#### 3.1.4. History: Africana Studies and African Spirituality

While African Spirituality has not traditionally been a primary topic of research and scholarship in Africana Studies, it is an important aspect. Africana Studies developed as a relatively new academic discipline when some scholars became critical of white historians’ negative views and stereotypes of African American history, perceived as primitive and void of culture. Africana Studies programs were being conceptualized at

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Fay, “Afrocentricity,” *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, December 1, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.39894>.



the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power movement. Melville Herskovits was an early pioneer of African Studies, promoting what was at the time a somewhat alien philosophy that African American history and culture had roots in Africa. African spirituality often serves as markers to trace and anchor African American people's history and culture, particularly when examining the history of precolonial ancient African civilizations and empires and postcolonial African and African Americans from Africa to slavery and the quest for liberation throughout the diaspora. To understand the true spirit and culture of African people, one must look at the evolution of African people within a spiritual and intellectual metaphysical context, an idea that Herskovits pioneered.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Albert Raboteau was an American scholar of African and African-American religions who adopted Herskovits's work to support his research and scholarship as Chair of the Department of Religion at Princeton University. Because of the prominent role of religion in the lives of people of African descent, he understood the importance of being intentional, partnering history and religious scholarship to ground and inform the other.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.1.5. Religion: The Black Church and African Spirituality

There has been a contentious relationship between the Black Church and African Spirituality. Black Church theology, led by Dr. James Cone, is based on oppression and black liberation. Anchored in Christianity, it is only one aspect of African Spirituality. Black Church theology of liberation rejects perceptions of inferiority and discrimination. According to Israel Akanji, Black Theology emerged to “speak against systems, persons,

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas E. Carne, “Melville Herskovits,” *The Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present*, December 1, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.45675>.

<sup>12</sup> Carne, “Melville Herskovits.”

and conditions impeding the realization of dignified African humanity.”<sup>13</sup> While Christianity and African Spirituality can complement each other, a fundamental problem of identity and perception can create barriers that challenge African American Christological commitments to evade African spirituality. The Black church often perceives African spirituality as unacceptable, and not biblically based, thus preventing the Black Church from crossing Christian boundaries to engage in or support Traditional African spirituality. Interestingly, some Black Christians are suspicious of African spirituality, even when the same practices are blessed as acceptable Christian practices. While Christianity has “miracles and mysticism,” they only deem these supernatural phenomena acceptable if white or European endorsed. However, the Black church’s perception of Traditional African Spirituality is changing. According to activist and scholar Audre Lorde, there is a growing hunger for African spirituality as people search for authentic spiritual experiences that exert power and life. Lorde argues that the issue is that African spirituality has been reduced to fetishes to minimize their power, but this is “what we do with our corpses: preserve them so we can ignore them...we preserve them in museums but deny their spiritual power... a museum is an odd place because it is usually dense with once-powerful objects rendered powerless.”<sup>14</sup>

Afropunk is a popular Black contemporary forum founded as an entertainment medium but has morphed into a movement. Its spear ranges from art to activism to politics to religion, all centered on Black culture across the diaspora. It is bold, innovative, and revolutionary, serving as the voice for the young Black culture. Afropunk

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<sup>13</sup> Israel Akanji, “Black Theology,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, September 30, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.47781>.

<sup>14</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 27, 83–87.

posted an article from Grapevine TV that supports this theory that a new radical shift is transforming how the Black culture views God and engages with the Divine. The article reports that many Black people express a visceral level of hate and fear regarding any spiritual theology that is not Christianity, mainly African spirituality. “This closed-mindedness is rooted in a culture of oppression built on Christianity. Black folks have had a hard time embracing power through fear-based religion, having been without it for so long.”<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Dr. Martin’s article asking Black Christians not to demonize or be afraid of African spirituality is an honest and insightful article where Martin explains that Black Christians have been gaslit through intentional miseducation caused by the evils of white supremacy and racism practiced in the white male-dominated Christian church.

Martin explains:

African people in the United States have long been brainwashed to believe that Africa held nothing of value. Our long-established societies, cultures, religions, and customs were considered savage and heathen. We were told to be grateful for our enslavement. We were told that enslaved Christianity was better than living as free African people. We were terrorized into giving up our names and much of our spirituality.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Martin’s work was well-received by some readers who wanted more from their religious experiences, vowing to advocate for transformation within or outside the Black Church. However, others were deeply critical of African spirituality because of religious fragility. Either way, transformation is inevitable. We must, therefore, work to

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<sup>15</sup> The Grapevine TV, “Black Magic: Unlocking Our Ancestral Power,” *Afropunk*, October 31, 2018, <https://afropunk.com/2018/10/black-magic-unlocking-our-ancestral-power/>.

<sup>16</sup> Darnise Martin, “Black Christians, Don’t Demonize African Spirituality,” *Religious News Service*, January 5, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/01/05/black-christians-dont-demonize-african-spirituality/>.

bridge the gap between the Black Church and African Spirituality to keep our collective power.

### 3.1.6 Closing

Academic disciplines like Anthropology, Psychology, Afrocentrism, Africana Studies, and Black Church Theology support aspects of African Spirituality but can also stifle it, perpetuating its inferior status. However, competing priorities and conflicting ideologies make it unrealistic to assume they are viable alternatives to advocate for Traditional African Spirituality as an academic discipline. Therefore, the study of African religions deserves a seat at the table to tell its own story and share its God concepts. We must explore other alternatives to maintain the integrity of African Spirituality. We can fulfill this by establishing Traditional African Spirituality as a separate academic discipline independent from other fields.

## **3.2 Traditional African Spirituality Programs Offered in Academia**

Most theology institutions do not require or offer courses on Traditional African Spirituality. As a field of study, they often consider it academically void, defined as the null curriculum category for subjects perceived as insignificant or not respected as an authentic discipline. This means they do not value African spirituality as an essential field of study, or there is no perceived demand for it.

While they do not widely teach Traditional African Spirituality at higher learning institutions, interest has been growing because of acceptance and exposure to African Spirituality as a valid religion. At least ten higher education institutions—to be detailed

below—have broken outside the norms of religious instruction to establish formal programs or offer individual classes in African Theology. These institutions provide a theological learning environment and academic portfolio that is more comprehensive and diverse. These institutions are taking advantage of a radical shift in consciousness, recognizing that Traditional African Spirituality is an academic discipline worthy of global research and scholarship. Conversely, the absence of Traditional Spirituality in academic settings is detrimental because it deprives students of the rich source of spiritual knowledge and understanding that African Spirituality offers and alternative sources and paths to the Divine. This paper invites religious and educational institutions to participate in this paradigm shift by advocating for and offering African Spirituality as a field of study.

Educational orientations in African Spirituality at these institutions range from formal to informal offerings that fall into four categories: (1) Formal or core standalone, independent curriculum that is overt, explicit, and intentional with a sequence of classes established as a program of study culminating in a degree, concentration, or certificate in African Theology; (2) Multilayered dependent African Theology curriculum embedded in interdisciplinary or inter-religious programs; (3) One-off individual classes taught as electives in African Spirituality; and (4) Open or informal offerings that are not part of the formal curriculum that allows students to take advantage of experiences outside the classroom, for example, in seminars, study travel tours, experiences, and community or social engagements. I summarize ten higher learning institutions in the United States with successful African Theology offerings below.

1. The University of Virginia has a Master of Arts and a Ph.D. program in African Diaspora Religions that studies the religious traditions of Africa and its diaspora. The interdisciplinary program draws upon related courses in other departments and university programs, such as Anthropology, History, Sociology, and African American and African Studies. It includes courses designed to introduce students to the general field of religious studies and advanced courses in which the student pursues specialized work in the practices, rituals, literature, philosophies, and social and cultural histories of specific African and African Diasporic traditions.<sup>17</sup>
2. The Union Theological Seminary offers a concentration in African Spirituality in the Master of Divinity program.<sup>18</sup>
3. Harvard University offers two tracks for the study of African Religion. The first is in the Department of African and African American Studies (AAAS) Program. AAAS is a multidisciplinary department that includes Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, Sociology, Psychology, Art, Music, History, Language and Linguistics, Women, Sexuality, and Gender Studies, as well as Literature and Philosophy focused on the United States, Africa, Afro-Latin America world, and the Caribbean. Dr. Jacob K. Olupona is the Professor of African and African American Studies and African Religious Traditions. Harvard also has an inter-religious Master of Theology program in African and African American Religious Studies that is offered as a concentration in religious expression in African, African American, and African diaspora studies focused on historical, sociological, phenomenological, literary, and theological

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<sup>17</sup> “About our Program,” University of Virginia Department of Religious Studies, 2023, <https://religiousstudies.as.virginia.edu/about-our-program>.

<sup>18</sup> “Degree Programs,” Union Theological Seminary, 2023, <https://utsnyc.edu/academics/degrees/>.

- analysis. While the program does not focus on Traditional African Religion/Spirituality, it has a few African theology courses in its catalog that include African Religion in the Diaspora, African Spirituality, African Spirituality and the Challenges of Modern Times, Introduction to African Languages and Culture, and Colonization. Courses also examine the religious traditions of black people in local and global contexts.<sup>19</sup>
4. Columbia University offers two tracks for studying African spirituality: the Department of African American & African Diaspora Studies and the graduate program in Religious Studies. They have limited classes in the course catalog, including Religion, Race, Philosophy in Africa and Beyond; Empire and Secularization in Africa: Reform, Mission, Islam; and On African Theory: Religion, Philosophy, Anthropology.<sup>20</sup>
  5. Yale Divinity School offers a concentration in Black Religion in the African Diaspora through the Masters of Arts in Religions program. It is an interdisciplinary program that includes a broad range of courses in theology, history, philosophy, aesthetics, and practices of Black religion. The University encourages students to take classes pertinent to African American religious studies in other departments (for example, in Anthropology, Religious Studies, History, African Studies, African American Studies, Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Music, and History of Art).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Department of African and African American Studies,” Harvard University, 2023, <https://aaas.fas.harvard.edu/>.

<sup>20</sup> “Department of Religion,” Columbia University, 2023, <https://religion.columbia.edu/>.

<sup>21</sup> “Black Religion in the African Diaspora,” Yale Divinity School, 2023, <https://divinity.yale.edu/academics/degree-and-certificate-requirements/concentrated-master-arts-religion-mar/black-religion-african-diaspora>.

6. Emory University's Lane Graduate School offers the Department of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern Religions (AAMER) program. This program does not offer a concentration on African Spirituality; it does, however, offer an inter-religious study of Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Indigenous, Islamic traditions, Christianity, and Judaism as practiced in Asian, African, and Middle Eastern regions and the diaspora. AAMER offers the study of religion, including ethnography, history, gender studies, philosophical studies, performance theory, philology, cultural and post-colonial studies, literary and legal studies, hermeneutics, and contemplative practices in indigenous categories and local cultures. Languages are also crucial for studying religions. Students must show proficiency in two or more foreign languages, including Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi-Urdu, Persian, Tibetan, Swahili, Tamil, or Telugu. Emory also offers a certificate program in Religion.<sup>22</sup>
7. Temple University offers a Master of Arts and Ph.D. program in the Department of Religion with a concentration in African Diaspora. Its courses include African religions, African American religions, Buddhism, Chinese religions, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. These courses offer historical, philosophical, and social scientific approaches. Temple University also provides seminars addressing religion in ethnicity, place, race, and time.<sup>23</sup>
8. Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) is a graduate theology school that combines HBCU seminaries and consortiums. Their mission statement, vision, goals, and code of ethics all focus on Africentric theology and the religious engagement of

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<sup>22</sup> "Asian, African, and Middle Eastern Religions," Emory Laney Graduate School, 2023, [https://gdr.emory.edu/academic\\_program/courses-of-study/cos-aamer.html](https://gdr.emory.edu/academic_program/courses-of-study/cos-aamer.html).

<sup>23</sup> "Religion," Temple University, 2023, <https://liberalarts.temple.edu/academics/departments-and-programs/religion/graduate>.



Africans and African Americans in global interpretations across the African diaspora. ITC designed its curriculums around the African philosophy of Sankofa, offering the most extensive African religious studies program. The curriculum focuses on ministries, teaching, and research in Religious and Africana Studies, World Religions, Black Church Liberation, African and Middle Eastern Religions, Traditional African Religions, Afrocentrism, and African American and Afro-Caribbean studies. The program also offers Religions of the World and Their Languages, including African languages such as Shona or Yoruba; Afrocentrism in African Centered Education and African Spirituality; and Educating in Faith in Africa with fieldwork in Africa. They also offer a Doctor of Ministry in Africentric Thinking and Liberation Practices through an Africentric lens within the African Diaspora; Africentric Philosophy and Black Liberation Theology based on historic African, African American, and Afro-Caribbean influences; and Intercultural Immersion Travel Seminars in cultures in the African diaspora.<sup>24</sup>

9. The Graduate Theological Union offers the Black Church/Africana Religious Studies (BC/ARS) certificate program that encompasses religious expressions of the Black Church in the broader phenomenon of African American Religion, including African American Religion, West Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and North America. It enhances and strengthens its academic offerings through visiting scholars; hosting seminars, workshops, symposia, and conferences to support research and exchanges;

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<sup>24</sup> “Degrees and Programs,” Interdenominational Theological Center, 2023, <https://www.itc.edu/academics/degrees-programs/>.

and partners with the African American Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>25</sup>

10. The African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association (ADRSA), founded at Harvard University, is an interdisciplinary consortium that advocates for including Traditional African Spirituality in religious studies, including research, scholarship and interdisciplinary ministry, classes, workshops, seminars, conferences, and networking across the diaspora.<sup>26</sup>

### **3.3 Why Should Traditional African Spirituality Be an Academic Discipline?**

Jane Guyer has advocated for the inclusion of African Studies in educational frameworks for higher learning, stating that the type of construct implemented will promote the kinds of research and scholarship offered based on intent/agenda, content, training, resources, politics, the reputation of the higher learning institution, and its vested interest in prestige, funding/budgets, and what the program can contribute to productivity. Therefore, the resources invested, and the priority attached to the program will influence the scholars attracted, the quality of the curriculum and educational experience, and the research conducted.<sup>27</sup> Guyer's arguments are just as valid for studying Traditional African Spirituality.

It is, therefore, essential for higher-level educational institutions to explore the advantages of including Traditional African Spirituality as a part of the curriculum to

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<sup>25</sup> "Departments and Concentrations," Graduate Theological Union, 2023, <https://www.gtu.edu/academics/departments-and-concentrations>.

<sup>26</sup> "Home," African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association, 2023, <https://adrsa.org/>.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Guyer, "African Studies in the United States: An interpretation," *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, December 1, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.39885>.

prioritize resources correctly and set expectations for success to affirm Traditional African Spirituality as a legitimate religion worthy of research and scholarship. Below are a few tangible and intangible benefits of including African Spirituality as an academic discipline:

1. *Traditional African Spirituality Provides Alternatives for Religious Expression.* It will create space to speak another spiritual language, offering opportunities to know other ways to be in a relationship with the Divine and the ability to tap into unfamiliar spiritual power. It will restore and expand academic standards within the broader realm of religion, pushing mainstream images of God and god concepts and offering alternatives to religions and religious experiences, research, and scholarship.
2. *Traditional African Spirituality Scholarship Legitimizes it as a Religion.* It will establish Traditional African Spirituality as an acceptable form of religious expression and make it religiously relevant, placing it on equal footing with mainstream religions like Christianity and Islam. It will allow students and scholars to study authentic African religions, not those re-interpreted and re-invented from other traditions.
3. *Traditional African Spirituality Supports Black Expression and Communities.* Establishing African Spirituality as a field of study will ensure that African religious practices receive proper recognition in theological scholarship and research. This is important because religion is essential for African expression and culture, restoring the identity and power of its people. It is essential for sustaining strong and vibrant Black families and communities across the diaspora—by breaking the chain of

religious oppression and offering absolute religious freedom that rejects the illusion of a people who believe they are powerless.<sup>28</sup>

4. *Traditional African Spirituality Allows for the Practice of Religious Justice.* It will allow religious institutions to lead the way for the freedom of religious expression. This is an opportunity to exercise religious justice, protect the sanctity and integrity of African religions, and address misconceptions and falsehoods, protecting African religions from the violence of oppression and marginalization. Academia can be the hands and voice offering light in religious practices by speaking wisdom and healing to African spirituality and elevating its status by expanding awareness and removing limitations and barriers to inclusion.
5. *Traditional African Spirituality Creates a Safe Space to Reclaim Lost and Hidden Spiritual Practices.* It will correct the historical record and reclaim lost spiritual power found in African spiritual practices by introducing ancient God concepts of the original people and one of the oldest religions in the world. It will reclaim the intellectual and spiritual property, empower, liberate, and return voice and agency, ensuring African spirituality is neither impeded nor stifled.<sup>29</sup>
6. *Traditional African Spirituality is an Opportunity to Decolonize Black Theology.* It will restore African spirituality's identity and spiritual integrity, identifying how it shaped and influenced and parallels other religions that borrowed from African spirituality. It will connect mainstream religions back to the source of Africa, like a spiritual DNA, restoring it to precolonial roots back to its authentic pre-colonized glory.

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<sup>28</sup> Guyer, "African Studies in the United States."

<sup>29</sup> Fay, "Afrocentricity."

## CHAPTER 4.

### RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

*Where there are experts, there will be no lack of learners. ~Swahili proverb*

Discussing the decline in traditional church-going religiosity in the United States and its impact on enrollment at CTS, President Braxton has said: “Nothing short of a wholesale revolution in theological education will save us.” At the same meeting, he went on to emphasize the institution’s strategic goals and values, including the importance of “rigor and relevance” in our degree programs and the importance of “meeting people’s needs.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Braxton’s approach to education at CTS aligns with what he said when he was introduced as President of CTS, saying, “ I am eager to pursue a bold and joyful agenda that considers constructive encounters with diverse others as the doorway to a renewed humanity and a refined understanding of theological education’s positive role in public life.”<sup>2</sup> This section summarizes the findings of this research and recommends Traditional African Spirituality as an academic program at CTS, presenting a high-level analysis of the viability of incorporating Traditional African Spirituality to revolutionize the curriculum at CTS. It will also include recommended next steps.

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<sup>1</sup> Brad Braxton, “September Staff Meeting (remarks, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, September 27, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Chicago Theological Seminary, “Chicago Theological Seminary Announces Dr. Brad R. Braxton as 14th President,” May 19, 2022, <https://www.ctschicago.edu/press/chicago-theological-seminary-announces-dr-brad-r-braxton-as-14th-president/#:~:text=New%20president%2C%20a%20religious%20studies%20scholar%20and%20public,progressive%20seminary.%20%E2%80%9CThe%20CTS%20community%20is%20incredibly%20pleased.>

## **4.1 Launching Traditional African Spirituality as a New Academic Program**

Up to this point, this thesis has addressed Traditional African Spirituality as a theoretical construct. This section uses an analysis of alternatives, an analytical comparison tool to assess the viability of implementing African theology into the curriculum at CTS. It rates high-level assessment criteria against a rating rationale presented below to determine the viability of this emerging discipline.

### 4.1.1 High-level Assessment Criteria

I will assess Traditional African Spirituality as an academic discipline against four criteria used as a rubric to establish the viability of integrating it as a new discipline into CTS' academic portfolio. The criterion includes (1) Core Value Requirements, (2) Educational Requirements, (3) Time Component, and (4) Cost Component, which are described below.

#### *1. Criterion 1: Core Value Requirement*

This criterion measures Traditional African Spirituality to determine if it is a good fit (compatible) based on its ability to align and integrate with the institution. It asks two questions: (1) Does it align with CTS's core values (is it consistent with the mission, vision, and strategic plan)? (2) Will it integrate well with the CTS curriculum?

#### *2. Criterion 2: Academic Requirements*

This criterion measures if Traditional African Spirituality is academically sound and can serve the community's intellectual needs. It measures if its vocational learning and academic outcomes will transform the academic landscape at CTS and academically prepare and equip students with advanced theological knowledge and skills, and advance

the expertise and credibility of faculty and administrators. It asks four questions: (1) Will it create innovative technical approaches capable of achieving tangible efficiencies, results, and improvements to revolutionize and transform the curriculum at CTS? (2) Will it prepare students for a meaningful transition to further theological education or career growth? (3) Will it serve diverse student needs? (4) Will it build and enhance the expertise of the faculty's experience and qualifications in scholarship and research?

### *3. Criterion 3: Time Component*

This criterion measures two components of time: the relevancy of Traditional African Spirituality as an academic discipline and the ability to integrate it into the curriculum at CTS easily. This criterion is essential for determining whether and how quickly it will enhance the students' and the institution's competitive edge. Two questions are required for this criterion: (1) Is it a relevant subject worthy of study in the current global culture, and does it reflect the changing needs of students, academic leaders, and society? Also, is it a helpful theological study field that is important and impactful? (2) How quickly can CTS integrate Traditional African Spirituality into the curriculum? What is the reasonable time for the discipline to be a fully functional and operational field of study? This includes the time for planning, development, "accreditation, faculty resource expansion, marketing, facilities," and technology.<sup>3</sup>

### *4. Criterion 4: Cost Component*

This criterion measures the cost of implementing this new field of study into the curriculum at CTS. It assesses if it is fiscally prudent to invest in Traditional African

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<sup>3</sup> Cherron Hoppes, "Expert reveals secret to creating new college programs FAST," *eCampus News.com*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.ecampusnews.com/campus-leadership/2016/12/12/creating-new-college-programs/>.

Spirituality as an academic discipline considering shrinking budgets and economic constraints many educational institutions are experiencing—meaning, is it an intelligent financial decision, will it generate or enhance the institution cash flow—what will be its economic impact? It asks three questions: (1) Will it present growth or economic opportunities? (2) Will it enhance demand attracting students and faculty? (3) Will it be a competitive program?

#### 4.1.2 High-Level Assessment Methodology

Table 4.1 assesses each criterion based on the rating system and associated rationale.

*Table 4. 1. Ratings and Rationale*

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<b>Exceeds</b>	Exceeds the performance requirement
<b>Meets</b>	Meets the performance requirement
<b>Does Not Meet</b>	Cannot meet the performance requirement
<b>Undetermined</b>	Indicates the absence of a rating; there isn't enough information to make a determination

An overall high-level rating was determined based on the individual ratings assigned to each element within a criterion.

#### 4.1.3 High-level Assessment Results

There must be an institutional process in which these assessments occur; however, I have done a preliminary evaluation from my perspective and knowledge. I will explain the results in the next section. I summarized the results of the high-level assessment in Table 2 below. This assessment, based on four criteria: Core Value Requirements,



Academic Requirements, Time Component, and Cost Component, overwhelmingly shows that Traditional African Spirituality would be an excellent candidate for revolutionizing the study of theology at CTS with an overall assessment rating of Exceeds performance capability.

*Table 4. 2. High-level Assessment Results*

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Traditional African Spirituality</b>	<b>High-level Rating</b>
<b>1. Core Value Requirements</b>	1. Does it align with CTS’s core values? Is it consistent with the mission, vision, and strategic plan?	<b>Exceeds</b>
	2. Will it integrate with the curriculum?	<b>Exceeds</b>
<b>2. Academic Requirements</b>	3. Will it prepare students for a meaningful transition to further education or career growth?	<b>Exceeds</b>
	4. Will it serve diverse student needs? How does the program reflect the diversity and international perspectives?	<b>Exceeds</b>
	5. Will it build on faculty expertise, experience, and qualifications?	<b>Meets</b>
	6. Are there innovative academic approaches that can achieve tangible results and improvements?	<b>Exceeds</b>
<b>3. Time Component</b>	7. Is it relevant?	<b>Exceeds</b>
	8. Can it be easily implemented?	<b>Undetermined</b>
<b>4. Cost Component</b>	9. Will it present growth or economic opportunities?	<b>Exceeds</b>
	10. Will it attract student demand?	<b>Exceeds</b>
	11. Is the program competitive?	<b>Exceeds</b>
<b>OVERALL HIGH-LEVEL RATING</b>		<b>Exceeds</b>

I present the detailed assessment results below for each criterion.

*1. Criterion 1: Core Value Requirements Assessment Results*

Traditional African Spirituality as an authentic field of theological study perfectly aligns with CTS's theological commitments, including its mission statement, vision, goals, and code of ethics. CTS is a graduate seminary school, and though it is affiliated with the United Church of Christ, it is an interdenominational theological school associated with multiple faith communities. Its mission is to educate persons theologically as religious leaders, scholars, and activists. It takes pride in being "one of the most inclusive and diverse institutions anywhere." CTS is therefore committed to cultural and religious diversity, equality, and inclusion, affirmed through the following tenets in its mission statement:

We are committed, in a society structured by white supremacy and racism, to challenge white privilege, to combat the forces of racial division and domination, and to equip leaders who embrace and celebrate racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity;

We are committed, in a global context of religious conflicts and a society structured by Christian privilege, to the joyous embrace of religious diversity, expanding our ground-breaking work in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Studies to advance understanding and collaboration among the rich multiplicity of spiritual traditions and life stances;

We are committed, recognizing that social divisions are local, national, and global, to international collaboration among individuals and institutions with similar commitments to our own.<sup>4</sup>

While this proposed academic discipline must align with CTS' theological commitments and requirements, an investment in Traditional African Spirituality is also an opportunity for CTS to revolutionize its current theological offerings. Investing in this new academic discipline will allow CTS to shift its strategic vision, expand the

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<sup>4</sup> Chicago Theological Seminary, "Mission Statement and Commitments," October 2017, <https://www.ctschicago.edu/commitments/>.

boundaries of the institution's core curriculum portfolio beyond Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, and expand into ground-breaking work in African spirituality and its rich spiritual traditions.

**Assessment Rating:** **Exceeds**. Based on the findings above, Criterion 1. Core Value Requirements exceed the performance requirements for this area.

## *2. Criterion 2: Academic Requirements Assessment Results*

Traditional African Spirituality is a viable solution to President Braxton's concern: How to ensure that CTS' curriculum remains current considering the decline in traditional church-going religiosity in the United States?

According to Yomi Adegoke, a British journalist and author, "Christianity is a distraction... many are turning their back on the faith and returning to the older, traditional religions of their ancestors."<sup>5</sup> People are emancipating themselves from racist and out-of-touch religious institutions; the Pew Research Center, which reported that African Americans also supported this great exodus from the Black church (mostly younger generations) are identifying as religiously unaffiliated and choosing alternative practices.<sup>6</sup>

People of African descent are tapping into generational power found in diasporic traditions at the intersection of Christian and West African faith traditions, namely, African religions like Santeria, Lucumi, Ifá, and Candomblé; magic, like Voodoo, Hoodoo, root work, conjure, and divination; nature-based healing traditions; and

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<sup>5</sup> Yomi Adegoke, "Jesus Hasn't Saved Us: The Young Black Woman Returning to Ancestral Religions," *Vice.com*, September 13, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjgxx4/jesus-hasnt-saved-us-young-black-women-returning-ancestral-religions>.

<sup>6</sup> Besheer Mohamed, Kiana Cox, Jeff Diamant, and Claire Gecewicz, "Faith Among Black Americans," *Pew Research Center*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/>.

readings, astrology, numerology, and other modalities. This has created a resurgence of people seeking spiritual freedom and empowerment through a new spiritual awakening that is unfolding. Access, availability, and education are primary barriers to African spirituality. Racism has limited access to African theology and limited access to its knowledge and power. Additionally, it is only sometimes apparent where practicing in African spirituality and rituals is safe. Therefore, it is detrimental to remove the barriers to Traditional African Spirituality, dismantle strongholds, and create gateways that establish viable alternatives that make the magic and mystique of Traditional African Spirituality more accessible, acceptable, and appealing.

Suppose CTS invests in the full spectrum of alternatives and wisdom practices in Traditional African Spirituality. In that case, it will increase CTS 'global presence in academia, advance theological research, and enhance exchange and educational and religious partnership opportunities on the Continent and across the diaspora. This will allow CTS to drive change by advocating for Traditional African Spirituality by offering it as a core theological discipline. This will address student demand for African studies and a more innovative curriculum. It will also build on faculty expertise by increasing their experience and qualifications and open opportunities for research and sabbatical alternatives, enhancing the quality of faculty attracted to CTS. By giving space and voice as an authentic religion worthy of study, scholarship, and research, CTS can become a theological gatekeeper and leader in African spirituality by reclaiming it as a legitimate theological field in academia by advocating for enlightening, educating, and reshaping views of African spirituality.

The knowledge of Traditional African Spirituality will offer several benefits. Such knowledge will reintroduce concepts that academia has overlooked, challenge traditional methods and scholarship, validate Traditional African Spirituality as a valuable academic field worthy of high-quality scholarship, and open opportunities for other marginalized spiritual constructs.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, by investing in the rich history and resources of African theology, CTS will meet the market demand of members of the African diaspora engaging in revolutionary original spiritual traditions. This will help CTS bridge the gap between the seminary, the church, and the community.

Multiple approaches will therefore be required to enact change. For example, a top-down approach led by spiritual leaders will set the tone for inclusion, diversity, and representation to re-integrate viable African spiritual practices into other faith traditions. Additionally, a bottom-up approach led by the community can push to revitalize and modernize African spirituality offerings to create new opportunities. CTS can facilitate these conversations by serving as an integrator to bring these communities together and find solutions.

There is relentless demand for more authentic and innovative forms of religious practices, like Traditional African Spirituality. CTS can take advantage of this need in the community by establishing a program that invests in African religion.

**Assessment Rating:** **Exceeds**. Based on the findings above, Criterion 2. Academic Requirements exceed the performance requirements for this area.

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<sup>7</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, 2-29.

### *3. Criterion 3: Time Component Assessment Results*

African scholars and theologians Dr. Jacob Olupona and Dr. John Mbiti “argued that traditional African religions deserved the same respect as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.”<sup>8</sup> They helped to introduce African religions, eradicate the myths, and popularize African spirituality and religious practices making Traditional African Spirituality relevant today. Their radical work serves as a model for the study of African theology. Olupona states that the spread of Islam and Christianity has caused Indigenous African Spirituality to fall out of favor on the continent. Still, its superpower—the multiplicity of ways it offers to engage practitioners—has sparked renewed interest in indigenous African Religion and rituals. He has noticed a revival where people are reconnecting with traditional African practices. Others credit interest in Traditional African Spirituality because it is the “not chosen religion” that makes it appealing—it is not Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.<sup>9</sup> Traditional African Spirituality has become relevant as a form of theological study, giving it a universal appeal. This ancient religion is a new and innovative way to understand and connect with the Divine. People are now finding Traditional African Spirituality relevant and impactful as an essential field of study to boost theological knowledge of God and themselves and access spiritual power.

Additionally, the time to implement an African theology discipline at CTS will be determined by several factors, including if decision makers make it a priority initiative; funding; demand (students and facility); and the type of African religious, and educational orientation selected ranging from the most robust to the least robust to

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Sandomir, “John Mbiti, 87, Dies; Punctured Myths About African Religions,” *New York Times*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/24/world/africa/john-mbiti-dead.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Chiorazzi, “The Spirituality of Africa”.

implement. It includes (1) Formal or core standalone, an independent curriculum that is overt, explicit, and intentional, with study culminating in a degree, concentration, or certificate in African Theology; (2) Multilayered dependent African Theology curriculum embedded in existing interdisciplinary or inter-religious programs; (3) One-off individual classes taught as electives; and (4) Informal offerings that are not part of the formal curriculum but offer students credits for experiences outside the classroom.

The growing number of African theology programs and course offerings at other universities and learning institutions, as presented in Section 3, suggests that there is some level of demand for academic opportunities in this field of study which shows a need to conduct a formal needs assessment to estimate the time it will take to launch the Traditional African Spirituality program at CTS. I have therefore rated the time to implement the program as undetermined.

**Criterion 3. Assessment Rating: Exceeds and Undetermined.** Based on the findings above, for Criterion 3. The assessment rated the time component as exceeding the performance requirements for relevancy but undetermined for implementation time.

#### *4. Criterion 4: Cost Component Assessment Results*

We can estimate the cost to implement Traditional African Spirituality as a theological discipline at CTS once we select an education category: (1) Formal or core standalone, independent curriculum, (2) Multilayered dependent program (embedded in existing interdisciplinary or inter-religious programs), (3) One-off individual elective classes, and (4) Informal offerings, whose costs typically range from the most expensive to the least costly.

We can make inferences to assess the impact of growth or economic opportunities regardless of the type of discipline selected. This criterion is called Cost Component because it establishes the discipline's ability to generate economic opportunities, attract students, and the program's competitiveness.<sup>10</sup>

New disciplines like Traditional African Spirituality will require innovative and savvy business solutions to remain economically sound and fiscally responsible to maximize efficiencies. One approach is to use a standard model successfully used to develop graduate school curricula, like CTS's partnership with the Bayan Islamic Graduate School. This model can be replicated by CTS for Traditional African Spirituality programs. The University of Virginia, Yale, Harvard, and Columbia have successfully implemented African Religion graduate programs that can also be modeled. Another approach is to look at non-traditional forms to revolutionize educational offerings by casting a wider net and engaging an untapped client base. Instead of targeting only degree candidates for university settings, CTS can expand the student base to grassroots communities.

Below are some innovative and fresh perspectives for engaging community-based education forums. CTS can engage or model them to increase economic outcomes and establish itself as a leader and theological gatekeeper in African religion. It will be necessary for CTS to conduct a formal cost-benefit analysis to determine if they are revenue-generating solutions or opportunities to increase equally important community engagement:

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<sup>10</sup> Hoppes, "Expert reveals secret to creating new college programs FAST."



1. *CTS can invest in eco-religion and technology.* Through its indigenous African Spirituality program, CTS can promote religion, nature, and technology by partnering with organizations like the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture (ISSRNC), a community of scholars committed to religion, environment, nature, and culture. For 2023, ISSRNC is hosting a conference titled “After Earth? Religion and Technology on a Changing Planet.”<sup>11</sup>
2. *CTS can be a consultant for the entertainment industry.* CTS can be a consultant or trusted advisor and expert in the study of African religion to validate religious rituals and practices for entertainment projects, including African-centered movies like *The Woman King* and *Black Panther*, museums featuring African exhibits, collaborate with African-centered musical artists, and be guest speakers for news outlets and social media.
3. *CTS can contract with governmental agencies.* As a leader in African theology, CTS can apply for grants and submit proposals, for example, to the Department of Defense United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) to support military peacekeeping operations and research in African counties. CTS can support ambassadors and diplomats as advisors to maintain the integrity of African culture and religion.<sup>12</sup> Also, CTS can participate in National Resource Programs set up under Title VI of the 1958 National Defense Education Act and the 1965 Higher Education Act to establish African religious studies programs and African language courses that focus on

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<sup>11</sup> International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture, “Home,” 2023, <https://www.issrnc.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> United States Africa Command, “Home,” 2023, <https://www.africom.mil/>.

African spirituality.<sup>13</sup> These are viable solutions; however, CTS must guard against these resources being perceived as a tool of neocolonialism and imperialism.

4. *CTS can host community-based conferences and symposiums.* There is a large contingent in the Black Consciousness and Pan African movement actively studying African culture and religion that is untapped by colleges and universities. CTS can partner with these organizations to expand its base and increase its profit margin. For example, Kemetamorphosis is an annual conference I co-founded hosted by Egyptologist and author Anthony Browder in Washington, DC, featuring discussions on the African origins of religion and spiritual practices.<sup>14</sup> *In Class with Carr* is a weekly educational podcast with 1,000+ students worldwide who tune in to discuss current topics on African history, culture, and religion.<sup>15</sup> It features Karen Hunter, a professor, journalist, author, and talk show host, and Dr. Greg Carr, Chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Howard University. CTS can also partner with organizations like the African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association (ADRSA),<sup>16</sup> the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC),<sup>17</sup> and Hapi One African<sup>18</sup> to host and support conferences on African

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<sup>13</sup> National Defense Education Act, Pub. L. No. 85-864 §601-603 (1958), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/85th-congress/house-bill/13247/text>; Higher Education Act, Pub. L. No. 89-329 (1965), <https://www.congress.gov/89/statute/STATUTE-79/STATUTE-79-Pg1219.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Misha Cornelius, "Howard University Alumnus Anthony Browder Shares Insights As First To Direct Egyptian Archeological Excavation Funded by African Americans," *The Dig*, Howard University, December 5, 2018, <https://thedig.howard.edu/all-stories/howard-university-alumnus-anthony-browder-shares-insights-first-direct-egyptian-archeological>.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Hunter and Greg Carr, "In Class with Carr," YouTube channel, 2020-present, <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaFQd3vEfo-p4Y12rHjfvjNKtSwz6TY80>.

<sup>16</sup> African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association, "Home."

<sup>17</sup> Association for the Study of Classical African Civilization, "Home," 2023, <https://ascac.org/>.

<sup>18</sup> HAPI, "HAPI Film," 2023, <https://www.hapifilm.com>.

religion. These networking and partnering opportunities can expand student demand and strengthen CTS's position as a leader in African Religion.

5. *CTS can host study tours for the community.* CTS can open the classroom experience to the community by hosting study tours focused on diasporic religion internationally and within the United States. For example, CTS can host study abroad programs, social justice trips, sabbaticals, African ancestry, and heritage tours to study Afro-Cuban spirituality in Cuba, including Yoruba, Ifa, and Santeria. Also, CTS can host traditional African religion study tours with trips to the Gullah territories of South Carolina and Georgia.

These opportunities can revolutionize how CTS derives economic benefits from investing in disciplines like African Spirituality.

**Criterion 4 Assessment Rating:** **Exceeds**. Based on the findings above, Criterion 4. The Cost Component exceeds the performance requirements for this area.

#### **4.2 Next Steps and Thesis Recommendation**

This thesis is both a call to resurrect Traditional African Spirituality as an authentic yet forgotten spiritual construct and a retelling of religious history to dispel the myths that Traditional African Spirituality is not worthy of academic study on the level of dominant religions. The predominant purpose of this thesis is to legitimize the study and practice of African spirituality as a core field of study at CTS. According to Dr. Olupona, with Traditional African Spirituality, we gain access to a new worldview that was once silenced but is now undergoing a revival.<sup>19</sup> It is, therefore, essential to engage African spirituality directly as an authentic religion. This is important because it affects the study

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<sup>19</sup> Chiorazzi, "The Spirituality of Africa."

of theology across religious disciplines, wisdom teachings, knowledge, and an extensive corpus of interdisciplinary information on Traditional African Spirituality influences. Dr. Mbiti correctly said that Traditional African Spirituality deserves the same respect as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> It is an essential field of study because it offers ancient ways of knowing and understanding the self in an empowering and transformative relationship with God. Additionally, its inclusive, diverse, and flexible nature is powerful and beautiful because it works well with other religions.

The results of the high-level assessment above demonstrates that if CTS implemented Traditional African Spirituality as a new discipline, it would be an excellent candidate for revolutionizing the study of theology at the institution, projected to exceed performance expectations. It is, therefore, a viable academic solution for consideration at CTS that is projected to create opportunities to establish CTS as an African spirituality advocate and intellectual center of excellence dedicated to the study, research, ministry, and scholarship of African spirituality across the diaspora.

One of the principal aims of this thesis is to reclaim Traditional African Spirituality as a legitimate form of theology. To that end, this thesis recommends that CTS convene a team to start the preliminary planning, needs assessment, approval process, and funding required to implement Traditional African Spirituality as a core academic discipline at CTS. It is time to remove the stigma and allow African theology to cross the academic borders—It deserves a seat and a voice at the table; without it, the study of religion is incomplete and void of its true power. Àṣẹ, It is So, Amen!

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<sup>20</sup> Sandomir, “John Mbiti, 87, Dies.”

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