

Global Philosophy of Religion Project 2  
Calabar Conference

# Spiritual Realities, Meaning in Life and Human Flourishing in African Philosophy of Religion

14 - 16 September, 2026



GLOBAL  
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION  
PROJECT 2

BIRMINGHAM CENTRE FOR PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION



UNIVERSITY  
OF CALABAR



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BIRMINGHAM





## **Prof. John O. Inyang**

### **Head of Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar**

The Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Nigeria, is pleased to host this year's Global Philosophy of Religion Project 2 conference with the theme: *Spiritual Realities, Meaning in Life and Human Flourishing in African Philosophy of Religion* on September 14-16, 2026. Hosting this international conference sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation is of course a rare privilege and the department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, appreciates the opportunity to host such an international delegation.

The Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, is known as one of Nigeria's foremost centers for philosophical inquiry with an edge in African philosophy. It is also known for a critical commitment to rigorous scholarship that engages both global and indigenous intellectual traditions. Our scholarship demonstrates the fostering of critical reflection on core areas of philosophy - ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, logic, axiology, science, religion, etc. For many decades, we have taken the task of not only training students in philosophy but also intentionally bridging global and indigenous thought (African worldview) with emphasis on the role of philosophy in human development, culture, leadership and spirituality.



In other words, our approach addresses philosophical engagement with lived human experiences and advancing African contributions to global conversations on religion, meaning, and the good life.

The leadership of Prof. John O. Inyang, current Head of Department of Philosophy, continues to propagate the common tradition of promoting research, dialogue, and teaching that connect philosophical ideas to African experiences. Hosting this 2026 international conference no doubt reaffirms our vision as a department to be a hub for cross-cultural philosophical engagement and advancing African contributions to global conversations on religion, meaning, and the good life.

On behalf of the academic and non-academic staff of the Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, I welcome all scholars, students, and philosophy enthusiasts to the ancient city of Calabar for three days of rigorous, meaningful, and robust intellectual exchange and discourse on African perspectives of meaning and spirituality. We hope that all guests will beside academic engagement, enjoy their stay in this part of the world. Please feel free to explore the uniqueness and experience of Africa and in particular Calabar.

Thank You.

**Prof. John O. Inyang**  
Head of Department



## **The Conversational Society of Philosophy**

The Conversational Society of Philosophy (CSP), also known as the Calabar (Conversational) School of Philosophy, is a forum for specialists in the fields of African philosophy, African intellectual history, African religions, and African studies who are interested in the Method of Conversational Thinking as an approach of choice in their research. The CSP emerged at the University of Calabar in the early 1990s, following the innovative works of Innocent Asouzu, Pantaleon Iroegbu, Chris Ijiomah and Godfrey Ozumba on the complementary turn in philosophy, and for three decades has led the project of system-building in African thought.

It represents a viable platform for cutting-edge research in African scholarship. For years, it has served and continues to serve as a decolonial intellectual fortress for training contemporary African thinkers, challenging baseless suppositions about Africa, and dismantling colonial and neo-colonial misrepresentation, misinterpretation and distortion of African lifeworld. Among some of the ground-breaking systems that have emerged from the School are Ibuanyidanda Philosophy, Complementary Reflection, Uwa Ontology, Harmonious Monism, Complementary Logic, Ezumezu Logic, Conversational Method and Philosophy, Consolation Metaphysics, Predeterministic Metaphysics, or Personhood-based Theory of Right Action.



## **Department of Philosophy, Federal University Otuoke**

The Department of Philosophy, Federal University Otuoke, is domiciled in the Faculty of Humanities. It was established on February 7, 2023. The first set of students were admitted in the 2023/2024 academic session while lectures commenced in November 2023. Prof. Socrates Ebo, the current Head of Department, and Prof. Bruno Y. Ikuli were the pioneer staff members. Resourceful academics such as Dr Ada Agada, Azibaolanami Iworiso and Kingsley Odey later joined the pioneer staff. The pioneer students of the department are currently in their 300 level. The Department is happy to partner with the Birmingham Centre for Philosophy of Religion towards the success of the conference on African philosophy of religion, spiritual realities, and human flourishing.

**Dr Aribiah Attie, Dr Ada Agada, Prof Jonathan Chimakonam**  
Local Organisers of the GPR2 Conference



## **Martin Pickup**

### **Global Philosophy of Religion Project 2 Lead**

On behalf of the Global Philosophy of Religion Project 2 (GPR2), a very warm welcome to our second international conference. We are delighted to have a wonderful line up of papers, both from invited speakers and drawn from our call for abstracts, and are looking forward to an exciting event full of groundbreaking ideas, thought-provoking questions, and collaborative conversations. Containing a mix of leading established scholars and up-and-coming stars of the next generations, we hope this conference will be a milestone in the ongoing flourishing of Philosophy of Religion on the African continent.

The conference feeds directly into our overall aims in the Global Philosophy of Religion initiative. We are striving to bring new voices and perspectives to bear on longstanding and fundamental questions about the world, humanity, and spiritual reality, and in doing so to transform the philosophy of religion into a truly global and diverse field of enquiry. GPR2 particularly focuses on human purpose and the meaning of life, as shown by the theme of this conference: *Spiritual Realities, Meaning in Life and Human Flourishing in African Philosophy of Religion*. By centring this conference on African philosophy of religion, we hope to increase the visibility of the excellent work taking place from these underrepresented perspectives.



Partnerships are essential to expanding the philosophy of religion beyond its traditional boundaries, and we are thrilled to be working with our collaborators for this conference:

*Dr Aribiah Attoe, Professor Jonathan Chimakonam, Dr Ada Agada*, the Department of Philosophy at the University of Calabar, the Conversational School of Philosophy, and the Department of Philosophy, Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria. We are very grateful to them for their expertise and efforts, and for our continuing relationship. We especially thank our hosts at the University of Calabar, including Vice-Chancellor *Prof Offiong Effanga Offiong*, Dean of Faculty *Prof Chike Ekeopara*, and Head of Department of Philosophy *Prof John Inyang*. We look forward to our time in Calabar and in your institution.

This conference (and our wider goals) would not be possible without the support of our funders, including the John Templeton Foundation (grant 62817), and we are very grateful. Finally, a thanks to our admin team, *Rabab Anjum* and *Abigail Villarroel*, for all their hard work.

In closing, let me wish you a stimulating few days, building scholarly community among friends old and new. We look forward to building together on existing foundations, adding some bricks of our own.

**Martin Pickup**

PI GPR2

# Conference Schedule

# Conference Schedule - Day 1

**Monday 14 September 2026**

*Senate Building, University of Calabar*

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**08:30–08:50**

Arrival

**08:50–09:00**

Welcome Address

*Vice Chancellor, Prof. Offiong Efanga Offiong*

*Dean of College of Art, Prof. Chike Augustine Ekeopara*

*Head of Department of Philosophy, Prof. John O. Inyang*

**09:00–10:00**

Opening Keynote

Is God Dead or at Large?

*Prof. Jonathan Okeke Chimakonam*

Chair: *Prof. E. Maduka*

**10:00–10:45**

Meaning and the Afterlife in African Philosophy

*Dr Munamoto Chemhuru*

Chair: *Prof. Godfrey Ozumba*

**10:45–11:00**

Tea Break

**11:00–11:45**

Ritual Phenomenology and Transcendent Meaning:

Reconstructing the African Conception of the Good Life

*Prof. Kyrian Ojong & Dr Francis Ekaya*

Chair: *Prof. Tom Ogar*

**11:45–12:30**

Between Fetishized Christianity and African Religious Agency:  
African Traditional Religion and the Reconfiguration of Christian  
Meaning

*Prof. Anatole Fogou*

Chair: *Prof. Andrew Uduigwomen*

**12:30–13:30**

Lunch Break

**13:30–14:15**

On the 'Presentist' Foundation of African Traditional Religions

*Mr Patrick Effiong Ben*

Chair: *Prof. (Mrs) Offiong*

**14:15–14:30**

Tea Break

**14:30–15:15**

Spiritual Yearning: The African Dilemma in Christian Religious  
Practice

*Dr Thaddeus Oparah*

Chair: *Dr Diana-Abasi*

**End of Day 1**

# Conference Schedule - Day 2

**Tuesday 15 September 2026**

*Transcorp Metropolitan Hotel*

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**09:00–09:45**

Private Qualia and God in Traditional African Religious Experiences  
*Prof Bernard Matolino*

Chair: *Prof. Uchegbue*

**09:45–10:30**

Òrìṣà-inspired Theory of Meaningfulness in African and Afro-Brazilian Spiritualities  
*Dr Emmanuel Ofuasia*

Chair: *Prof. Okon*

**10:30–10:45**

Tea Break

**10:45–11:30**

Man, and the Spirit: An Investigation into the Dialectical Coexistence of Man and the Spiritual in Igbo-African Ontology  
*Prof. Socrates Ebo*

Chair: *Prof. Kyrian Ojong*

**11:30–12:15**

Ancestors, Reincarnation, and Environmental Stewardship: Philosophical Reflections on Abua Indigenous Cosmology for Human Flourishing  
*Dr John Clerk Koko*

Chair: *Prof. Kyrian Ojong*

**12:15–13:15**

Lunch Break

**13:15–14:00**

Can Ancestral Authority Limit Individual Moral Agency?

*Ms Ebbah Dube*

Chair: *Prof. Tom Ogar*

**14:00–14:45**

African and Afro-Diasporic Spiritualities as Lived Philosophies of  
Meaning and Belonging

*Dr Pius Mosima*

Chair: *Dr Diana-Abasi*

**End of Day 2**



# Conference Schedule - Day 3

Wednesday 16 September 2026

*Transcorp Metropolitan Hotel*

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**09:00–09:45**

Distributed Agency and Human Flourishing:  
African and Afro-Diasporic Views on Self and Reality  
*Prof. Matthew Cipreen & Ms Maria Almendra*

Chair: *Dr Diana-Abasi*

**09:45–10:30**

Are African Lives Anti-meaningful?  
*Dr Aribiah Attoe*

Chair: *Prof. A. Uduigwomen*

**10:30–10:45**

Tea Break

**10:45–11:30**

Belief in God and Subjective Wellbeing in an African Context  
*Dr Ada Agada*

Chair: *Prof. Godfrey Ozumba*

**11:30–12:15**

Movements of Meaning: Relational Immortality and Afterlife in  
African Philosophy of Religion  
*Dr Chiaghana Edwin Ejesi*

Chair: *Prof. (Mrs) Offiong*

**12:15–13:15**

Lunch Break

**13:15–14:00**

Why Memory Cannot Ground Meaning:

Botho and the Metaphysics of Human Significance

*Dr Doreen Sesiro*

Chair: *Prof. Okon*

**14:00–14:15**

Tea Break

**14:15–15:15**

Closing Keynote

Meaning and Human Flourishing in African Traditional Religions  
(ATRs) and Christian Religion: A Philosophical Inquiry

*Dr Christiana Idika*

Chair: *Prof. Godfrey Ozumba*

**15:15–15:30**

Closing Remarks

*Global Philosophy of Religion 2 Team*

**End of Day 3**

# Conference Speakers & Abstracts

Dr Ada Agada

Dr Aribiah Attoe

Mr Patrick Effiong Ben

Dr Munamoto Chemhuru

Prof Jonathan Okeke Chimakonam

Prof Matthew Crippen & Ms Maria Almendra Sotelo

Ms Ebbah Dube

Prof Socrates Ebo

Dr Chiaghana Edwin Ejesi

Prof Anatole Fogou

Dr Christiana Idika

Dr John Clerk Koko

Prof Bernard Matolino

Dr Pius Mosima

Dr Emmanuel Ofuasia

Prof Kyrian Ojong A. & Dr Ogonyi Francis Ekaya

Dr Thaddeus Oparah

Dr Doreen Sesiro

## Belief in God and Subjective Wellbeing in an African Context

In this paper, I exhibit the two dominant conceptions of God in African philosophy of religion, namely, (a) the perfect God view, and (b) the limited God view.

Using indices of subjective wellbeing such as happiness, hope, contentment, and resilience in the face of adversity, I compare and contrast the level of life satisfaction that believers in the perfect God and limited God can conceivably self-report as a marker of faith. Specifically, I raise the question whether it is more likely that a believer will report a higher level of subjective wellbeing if they believe in a perfect God or a limited God, with due consideration to the this-worldly character of African Traditional Religion (ATR) eschatology and the problem of evil that accompanies belief in a perfect God.

I highlight the differences in the capacities of the perfect God and limited God. Deploying the method of philosophical analysis and argumentation, I argue that it is more likely that a believer will report a higher level of subjective wellbeing if their faith arises from belief in the existence of the perfect God rather than the limited God.

## Aribiah Attoe

University of the Witwatersrand & Global Philosophy of Religion Project 2 in  
University of Birmingham, South Africa & United Kingdom

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# Are Black African Lives Anti-meaningful?

Ideas such as Ubuntu, complementarity, negritude, and other such forms of (African) humanism suggest that there are reasons for Africans to be optimistic and hopeful about life; and that by working in solidarity together towards some common good, by treating others well, or by affirming their humanness/dignity in some way, life could be meaningful and flourishing would be possible. Unfortunately, these hopes and ideas do not always materialise or reflect the lived reality of many Africans today. In this disconnect between hope and reality, I, in this talk/conversation, ask whether black Africans in general are living anti-meaningful lives.

In answering this question, I reflect on several crucial clues that lead me to respond in the affirmative. First, I extract anti-meaning from the forced but inevitably tragic pursuit of unattainable meaning (as Ada Agada notes in his consolation philosophy); from a pessimistic metaphysics that reveals Africans as ontologically alive but socially dead; from an experience of self that is forcibly solipsistic and hateful; and from an existence that is characterised by violence (both gendered and non-gendered), powerlessness and a dependence on the benevolence of oppressive structures for survival. My current conclusion is that there are good reasons to be pessimistic about a reprieve from anti-meaning since escape from anti-meaning (in this context) requires revolutionary suicide or a brand-new world. Indeed, even an improbable escape from these social indicators of anti-meaning is insufficient since the tragic pursuit of unattainable meaning is inevitable.

# Patrick Effiong Ben

The University of Manchester, United Kingdom

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## On the ‘Presentist’ Foundation of African Traditional Religions

***“To live is to be caught up in a religious drama.”***

**— John S. Mbiti (1970: 19)**

In this paper, I argue that African Traditional Religions (hereafter ‘ATR’s’) operate according to a fundamentally different religious logic, specifically, one oriented toward the maintenance of cosmic and communal harmony in the present world rather than the pursuit of salvation beyond it. This makes ATRs structurally closer to non-salvific religious frameworks than to salvation-centred theistic religions. Call this the ‘presentist’ view.

This position is motivated by the following questions: What if the primary aim of religion were not salvation at all? If the fate of the soul was off the charts, how might we find the motivation for religious beliefs? Throughout much of the history of the philosophy of religion, religion has been primarily understood as a response to the problem of ultimate human destiny. Within this framework, religious life is oriented toward securing salvation, eternal life, or liberation from fundamental human conditions.

In this regard, influential theological traditions, particularly those shaped by thinkers such as Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), have treated the central question of religion as one concerning the fate of the soul beyond the present world. Or, as a matter of soteriology. As Wolfgang Vondey (2017: 223) puts it, soteriology is the “narrative account of Pentecostal theology, which originates from, tends toward, and is supported throughout by the doctrine of salvation.” However, this assumption reflects the structure of specific religious traditions rather than a universal characteristic of religion.

Some religious systems, especially those in Africa, Asia, and other Indigenous communities in Latin America, do not organise their beliefs and practices around the pursuit of final salvation or transcendence.

Rather, they focus on sustaining harmony within the present world—that is, among the living (i.e., both human and nonhuman beings), the ancestors (as the living-dead), and the broader social and spiritual order. ATRs stand out in this regard.

ATRs are often mischaracterised when analysed through the dominant soteriological lens of Western philosophy of religion, which assumes that the primary aim of religion is ultimate salvation or transcendence. On the contrary, ATRs are foundationally ‘presentist’ in outlook and community-oriented in their purpose.

Consider the drama of life expressed in the African concept of time, explained by Mbiti. According to John Mbiti (1970), Africans are fundamentally ‘presentist’ in their social organisation, which in turn is influenced by their two-dimensional conception of time. This is evident in the organisation of daily life around three temporal categories: past events (those that have already occurred), present events (those that are currently occurring), and imminent events (those that are about to occur). These categories express the African concept of time. Time, for the African broadly fall under two categories—actual time and potential time. While actual time encompasses events occurring in the present and those that have already occurred, thus positioned in the past, potential time, which is also regarded as an extension of the present, captures what is imminent or certain to occur (Mbiti 1970: 21-23). Events that do not fit into either category—neither present nor past, nor certain to occur—fall outside the concept of time and are classified as “No-time.” Thus, for the traditional African, the drama of life is fundamentally ‘presentist’ or ‘event-based’ in outlook.

Additionally, Mbiti (1970: 19) also explains that “to live [in an African society] is to be caught up in a religious drama” (emphasis mine). This is because not only are Africans notoriously religious, but “religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it” (Mbiti 1970: 1). The strong influence of religion on people’s lives in African societies, coupled with a presentist conception of time, has some implications for ATRs.

If African traditional religion is therefore best understood not as a salvation-centred religion obsessed with a distant eschatological future, but as a cosmic-harmony religion, whose primary aim is the maintenance of relational and communal balance within the present world, rather than the attainment of ultimate salvation beyond it. What implications can be drawn from this in understanding where ATRs, for the most part, fall in the religious spectrum? In addition, if religion is commonly understood as a system concerned with ultimate salvation or transcendence beyond the present world, how should we understand religious traditions whose primary aim is not salvation but the maintenance of harmony within the present world?

My argument in response to these questions has two parts. First, drawing on Mbiti's (1970) concept of African time and Ifeanyi Menkiti's (2004) notion of 'known things', I argue that ATRs are fundamentally 'presentist' in that they focus on maintaining a community-oriented harmony among humans, ancestors, spirits, and the natural world in the present. Second, by contrasting salvation-centred religions with this-worldly, harmony-oriented systems, I demonstrate that ATRs are structurally closer to non-salvific religious frameworks than to salvation-centred theisms. This analysis challenges the framework which centres the afterlife and demonstrates that religious systems can function primarily to sustain cosmic and social order rather than achieve ultimate metaphysical fulfilment.

The paper shall proceed as follows. In Section 1, I motivate the discussion of philosophy of religion by highlighting a common misconception, particularly one involving the mischaracterisation of ATRs when analysed through the dominant soteriological lens of Western philosophy of religion, which assumes that the primary aim of religion is ultimate salvation or transcendence. In Section 2, I explain the dominant assumption in philosophy of religion, specifically, the soteriological understanding of religion. In Section 3, drawing on Mbiti's concept of African time and Menkiti's notion of known things, I explain ATR's present-focused orientation and its centrality in African thought. By analysing African traditional religion as a present-focused cosmic-harmony system rather than a salvation-centred one,



I challenge the prevailing soteriological framework in philosophy of religion and demonstrate that religion can function primarily to maintain communal and cosmic order rather than to secure ultimate transcendence. In Section 4, I highlight the distinction between cosmic-harmony religion vs salvation-centred religion and consider their implications for ATRs. In Section 5, I address three possible objections to my position.

## References

Mbiti, John S. 1970. *African Religions and Philosophy*. New York: Anchor Books.

Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. 2004. On the Normative Conception of a Person. In *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Edited by Kwasi Wiredu. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, pp. 324-331.

Vondey, Wolfgang. 2017. Soteriology at the Altar: Pentecostal Contributions to Salvation as Praxis. *Transformation* 34 (3): pp. 223-238. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378816675831>.

# Munamato Chemhuru

Great Zimbabwe University & University of Johannesburg,  
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## Meaning and the Afterlife in African Philosophy

In the bulk of the literature that is available on the question of meaning, there is consensus that meaning of life is different from meaning in life. A number of philosophers believe the meaning in life to be more subjective (emphasising importance of individual purposes derived from one's experiences and relationships in the world) while meaning of life is rather taken as objective (emphasising how human life is oriented towards some universal values, significance or purpose). It broadly focusses on what existence is all about. Metz sees meaning in life as something good for its own sake (Metz, 2017), implying that meaning in life is the universal standard by which human life ought to be oriented towards. Yet, meaning of life also implies individual choices made by persons in their quest for human purpose and wellbeing as individual persons. This makes it very difficult to draw a distinction on whether human purpose ought to be tailored towards attaining meaning of life or meaning in life? Indeed, these questions have preoccupied Western philosopher for a very long time since early Greek philosophy where Plato looks at the human person as being in search of meaning. Yet, discourse from African philosophy seems to be lacking in terms of how to address these questions (see Attoe, 2017). It is only until recently that we have started to have a number of African philosophers engaging in such a discourse.

In this work, I seek to consider how the African conceptions of the afterlife might be understood if we are to understand the distinction between meaning of life and meaning in life. I argue that while the meaning of life in African philosophy is not necessarily oriented towards an understanding of the afterlife, the meaning of life is in itself, a necessary condition for the realisation of the meaning in life. Yet, the idea of meaning in life is essentially tied to the afterlife in African philosophy. I contend that this tripartite view of human existence and meaning can be expressed from two dimensions as follows:

1. An individual who fails to realise the meaning in life will ultimately fail to realise the meaning of life and in the end have bad relationships with the afterlife. In some cases, the bad relationships with the afterlife might also be taken as the cause for the failure to realise the meaning in life and ultimately the meaning of life in general.

2. Another dimension is also that an individual who properly realises the meaning in life will most certainly realise the meaning of life and definitely have proper or good relationships with the afterlife. And in most cases, the individual will be rewarded with both meaning in life and meaning of life on the basis of the good relationships with the afterlife.

I ride on the above two positions in order to defend the view that meaningfulness of life and meaningfulness in life are essentially tied to the supernatural, i.e., belief and proper relationships with the afterlife. Some of the questions which I will address as I defend the above arguments include, but are not limited to the following: What is the afterlife in African philosophy of religion? Is there life after life in African conceptions of religion? What ought the relationships between humans and the afterlife be like? And how does the afterlife connect with meaning of life and meaning in life?

I address the above important, and yet underexplored questions, by appealing to different African philosophical conceptions about existence (see Mbiti, 1969; Menkiti, 1984, 2004) . Recall that the African conceptions about existence accept a relational ontology in which human beings are not only related to each other, but to various other beings such as those in the afterlife like the spiritual beings, ancestors, and other vital forces. Of course, such a metaphysical view about existence is often objected for failing to account for the beingness of such forms of reality as well as the failure to explain the transition from the is to the ought (see Metz, 2022). However, I will provide adequate reasons to respond to such objections about African metaphysical beings that constitute the afterlife and the moral role that they play in grounding meaning of life and meaning in life in African philosophy of religion.

This article will divide into four main sections as follows: The first section focusses on the afterlife in African philosophy. This particular section will mainly address some of the important issues about the nature of life after death as well as how it fits and performs different roles within the African relational hierarchy of existence that stretches from the Supreme Being/God, the ancestors, spirits, vital forces down to human beings. In the second section, I focus on the meaning of life in African philosophy of religion.

Here I consider what African philosophy says about existence and life itself and what the purpose of life ought to be. In the third section, I consider the particular and subjective question about meaning in life where I grapple with questions about how one ought to conduct their life in order to fulfill human purpose. In the fourth and last section of the article, it is where I consider the interplay between meaning of life and the after life on the one hand, and that of meaning in life and the afterlife on the other hand.

Ultimately, I seek to defend an oft-neglected perspective in African philosophy of religion, one that considers the afterlife to be inseparable from both meaning of life and meaning in life. It is such that if we want to understand either meaning of life or meaning in life, we also need to appreciate the significance of the afterlife in African conceptions of religion. At the same time, meaning in life and meaning of life also augment each other in such a way that meaning of life cannot be realised without appealing to meaning in life as I will clearly show in this article.

## Is God Dead or at Large? A painless way to make the problem of Evil fall away

The problem of evil, which is one of Western philosophy's oldest perennial problems, is broadly about why there is so much suffering and evil in a world created and controlled by an all-powerful and all-merciful God. Whether in its earliest logical formulation by Epicurus, or in its later evidential iteration by William Rowe, it has defied a definitive resolution. The theodicy popularised by Wilhelm Leibniz falls short of a clear resolution, being unconvincing in handling the logical variant and ineffectual for the evidential formulation. In African philosophy of religion, some scholars have argued that the problem falls away since God(s) in the African pantheon lack(s) the omni attributes. This, however, will be a very painful approach for Christians since the absence of God who lacks the omni attributes would create a cultural vacuum in the universe they believe was created and controlled by an all-powerful and all-merciful God.

To avoid this painful cultural vacuum and make the problem painlessly fall away, I would bypass the conventional approach of centering human interest and instead center God's interest. I develop this theory by considering salient arguments in the literature, but more importantly leveraging the clues in the Christian Bible, widely believed by adherents to contain God's words. I begin my inquiry with two assumptions. In the face of unmitigated evil in the world and the belief in a God with omni attributes, assumption one holds, à la Nietzsche, that God is likely dead, while assumption 2 holds that he may be at large.

I consider these two plausible explanations for why evil persists in the world. On the one hand, if God were dead, it would be pointless to debate why He is not addressing the problem of evil. On the other hand, if He were at large in the sense of having created the best possible world that functions in His best interest, then it would also be a moot point to stress over why He allows the evil in the world. Why bother ourselves about the persistence of evil in the world if the only God who has the power and kind disposition to end it is no longer around or does not want to?

# **Matthew Crippen & Maria Almendra Sotelo**

Pusan National University and Berlin School of Mind and Brain & University  
College Dublin, South Korea, Germany & Ireland

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## **Distributed Agency and Human Flourishing: African and Afro-Diasporic Views on Self and Reality**

### **Introduction**

Prevailing theories of human flourishing typically assume that individuals are the primary units of meaning. This paper develops an alternative account grounded in African and Afro-diasporic conceptions of spiritual reality, relational ontology and distributed agency. Drawing on ubuntu metaphysics, Africapitalist approaches to community, place and socially embedded economic life and cross-cultural analyses of selfhood and illness, it argues that dominant Western models centered on autonomy, internal coherence and control fail to capture key dimensions of flourishing.

Two claims guide the analysis. First, African and Afro-diasporic traditions articulate a metaphysics of relational vitality in which the self is not an isolated locus of agency but an emergent node within a network that includes visible and invisible agents. Second, these traditions dissolve familiar dichotomies —individual/collective, autonomy/dependence, justice/reconciliation, spiritual/material—by treating them as co-constitutive rather than opposed. This relational account of personhood has significant implications for philosophy of religion. The paper proceeds by outlining a relational ontology of personhood, examining its theological and cultural expressions and showing how it reshapes accounts of agency, mental health and flourishing.



## **Relational Ontology and Spiritual Reality**

A widely circulated African formulation especially associated with ubuntu and repeated by scholars ranging from Mbiti and Tutu to Nussbaum, More, Ewuoso and Hall expresses both an ethical ideal and a metaphysical assertion about the constitution of persons: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”

One upshot is that importantly human features such as language, cooking and religion are achieved in groups, so communal life precedes individual excellence. In some interpretations, the persons comprising the “I” and “we” extend beyond living humans to include ancestors, nonhuman life and a spiritually animate cosmos. Whether one adopts a human-centered or more expansive ontology, a defining feature of many African philosophical and religious traditions is not the rejection of individualism per se but the claim that communal flourishing is a condition of individual flourishing.

These views resonate with contemporary philosophical approaches to distributed agency. Extended mind theory and Latour’s actor–network theory similarly describe agency as emerging from dynamic assemblages of humans, nonhumans and material structures. Read alongside African traditions, these approaches converge on a non-localized account of agency distributed across relational systems.

## **Cultural Mixture and Theological Adaptation**

These relational traditions are historically dynamic. Ideas of cultural purity are often foreign to Indigenous communities, reflecting colonial classifications rather than lived realities.

In many African and Afro-diasporic contexts, traditions are living and responsive, evolving through interaction with new environments and belief systems. So-called syncretism is better understood as continuity through transformation.



Tutu's work exemplifies this dynamic. Integrating ubuntu into Christian theology, he reinterprets reconciliation, forgiveness and the image of God in relational terms.

All human beings bear divine dignity, and exclusion or dehumanization becomes both a moral and theological error. God's universality—almost paradoxically—entails that no tradition has exclusive access to truth.

Chuwa similarly presents ubuntu as compatible with broader ethical and religious frameworks, emphasizing solidarity, care and interconnectedness across human, ecological and cosmic domains.

### **Afro-diasporic Traditions**

Afro-diasporic traditions such as Candomblé further illustrate this continuity while making the distributed nature of agency particularly explicit. Originating through the transatlantic transmission of African religious systems and now centered primarily in Brazil, Candomblé maintains a cosmology in which human life is inseparable from networks of spiritual forces. Individuals are understood as belonging to particular orixás—divine entities with whom they maintain ongoing relationships, often identified through divinatory practices conducted by ritual specialists.

Within this framework, agency is not localized solely in individuals but distributed across human and nonhuman actors. Spiritual forces are active participants in shaping experience, identity and wellbeing. This has direct implications for how suffering is interpreted. Conditions that would be classified in Western biomedical models as psychological disorders—such as depression, anxiety or severe distress—are often understood instead as manifestations of spiritual imbalance or as indications of a developing relationship with an orixá.

This reframing does not deny distress but situates it within a relational field. Experiences of suffering may signal misalignment within a broader network of relations or indicate a call toward religious initiation and transformation. What appears, from an individualist perspective, as dysfunction becomes intelligible as part of a meaningful process embedded in communal and spiritual life. In order to frame this in analogous terms that are likely more appealing to secular researchers, we may consider AD(H)D. What appears as poor focus in one setting may be a restless drive that proves advantageous in another.

Eisenberg and colleagues report that among Ariaal nomads in Kenya, individuals scoring higher on behavioral markers associated with AD(H)D show certain benefits, including better nutritional outcomes.

This raises an instructive question: does a nomad develop a disorder simply by relocating to an industrialized environment, only to be “cured” upon returning home? A more plausible interpretation is that many obstacles are environmentally produced, emerging from mismatches between embodied dispositions and institutional contexts, including community norms for how we ought to be as people. Candomblé practitioners propose something similar, though here the environment encompasses both physical and spiritual relations.

## **Distributed Agency and Human Flourishing**

One idea advanced—which is getting increasing traction in cultural psychology—is that individualistic autonomy and interdependence are not mutually exclusive. Ferrari, for example, reports that rural South African women value autonomy yet often pursue it through peer relationships that sustain an interdependent sense of self. Autonomy here operates through, rather than against, social relations.

A somewhat related premise is this: while some accounts assert that privacy is more between groups than individuals in ubuntu traditions, this is relatable to most who have the experience of having matters that are discussed openly between family members but not beyond them. Psychological anthropology further supports this account. Discussing schizophrenia, Luhrmann's research team shows that voice-hearing varies across cultural contexts. In more individualistic settings, voices are often experienced as intrusive or hostile. In contexts such as Ghana or India, individuals more frequently describe voices as socially embedded or benign—perhaps not surprising in cases where there is greater “we-subjectivity,” so that self-as-other is closer to the norm. In the West, where the self is conceived as bounded and private, internally generated voices can feel alien and threatening.

Luhrmann et al. show that strong community support and flexible social roles improve outcomes. For example, shamanic training appears to teach individuals to ignore bad spiritual voices while engaging with good ones, reducing detrimental effects of toxic identification with psychosis. Altogether, this suggests that social milieus can have varying degrees of hostility, shaping the extent to which schizophrenia is experienced as a mental illness. The case of Candomblé reiterates this point. Experiences that might be pathologized within Western psychiatry can instead be interpreted as meaningful forms of spiritual communication or transformation. Distress is reinterpreted through ritual, community and alignment with spiritual forces.

Africapitalist perspectives extend this relational model into economic and material domains. Rather than treating economic activity as an arena of individual maximization, Africapitalism emphasizes value creation through community, long-term social investment and place-based responsibility. Economic agency is thus distributed, emerging from networks of social obligation, environmental embeddedness and intergenerational continuity. Flourishing is not reducible to individual accumulation or preference satisfaction but depends on sustaining relational systems that enable collective wellbeing.

African philosophical traditions often define flourishing in terms of vitality, harmony and relational balance. Ubuntu ethics emphasizes care, solidarity and communal wellbeing across human, ecological and cosmic domains. Chuwa links flourishing to psychological peace achieved through harmonious relations at individual, social and cosmic levels. Tutu further reframes flourishing by dissolving the opposition between justice and reconciliation. Rejecting purely retributive models, he emphasizes restorative approaches aimed at healing relationships. Salvation is collective and individual, involving the repair of social and moral bonds.

This framework clarifies the role of social context in mental health. If distress is relationally shaped, flourishing depends not only on internal states but on the quality of social and cultural contexts. Communities that sustain belonging, integrate difference and provide meaningful roles may reduce alienation and support wellbeing.

## **Summation**

This paper challenges excessively individualistic models of meaning by foregrounding relational ontology, distributed agency and the integration of spiritual and material life. African and Afro-diasporic traditions show that meaning is not an individual possession. It is an emergent property of participation in a relational order that undergirds possibilities of individual flourishing.

Tutu's theological reflections deepen this account by presenting God as relational and universal, disclosed through interconnected human life rather than confined to any single tradition. Chuwa situates this within a broader ethical and cosmic framework linking dignity, solidarity and environment.

Accordingly, debates in philosophy of religion—especially concerning divine agency, salvation and pluralism—may be framed in relational rather than purely individualist terms. In other words, a globally inclusive philosophy of religion does well to treat meaning as emerging from relations among persons, environments and spiritual realities rather than from isolated selves.

# Can Ancestral Authority Limit Individual Moral Agency?

In African Traditional Religions (ATR) the belief in ancestors and in relational personhood are intricately and complexly interconnected. In traditional African societies such as the Bantu ethnic groups, it is a common belief that physical death is not the end of life, but a part of ontological progression or simply what can be taken as the journey of life. Ontological progression is said to begin before birth, moves through childhood, adulthood, elderhood, ancestorhood and finally the nameless dead (Menkiti, 2004). Hence, when a human being dies physically, they move on to the state of ancestorhood where they continue to exist and interact with their living relatives.

On the other hand, the belief in Ubuntu emphasizes the idea that a person cannot exist in the absence of others (Ramose, 2003). This relational framework entails that the community influences the individual because the individual cannot exist outside of the community. This could be taken to mean that an individual's general life, relationships, their thoughts and behaviors are influenced to some extent by the community. In such communities, it can be understood that relationships are not limited to living human beings but extend to ancestors.

Thus, when we look at the belief in ancestors and in Ubuntu, it could be seen that ancestors are part of the community, their continued existence and influential capacity is linked to other communal agents such as their living relatives. Given this, ancestors are believed to play a role in promoting social harmony and well-being because they are influential in an individual's life and that of the community they continue to exist in. Their advice and help are often sought out, and, in some cases, they appear to inform the members of their community about moral matters, they provide advice on how to handle disputes and explain what will promote life social harmony.

Thus, in such societies, life is meaningful if it promotes relationality because acknowledging that one's existence is connected to others' existence is essential to the grounding and continuity of that society. This means that in these societies communal agents are not limited to the living only but also involve ancestors as they are part of the moral community. Ancestors matter to the living because they function as an intermediary between the physical world and the spiritual world. Essentially within the African traditional worldview ancestors are regarded as epistemic and moral authorities.

In Mbiti's work, ancestors or the living dead are said to be able to communicate with their living relatives using the same language and at the same time, they can communicate in the language of the spirit (1969: 108). Metaphysically, this is significant because ancestors are intelligible to the living which in turn makes it easier for them (i.e. the living) to believe in the existence of that which is beyond the physical and natural world. Epistemically, ancestors facilitate in conveying knowledge because they are consulted in cases of divination and mediumship where they provide causal explanations and solutions to people's problems depending on the case. Since Menkiti's normative conception of personhood implies that ancestors are continuing persons in other worlds, it could be inferred that the idea of moral excellence and communal recognition continues to shape one's ontological progression beyond the grave (2004). And so, this explains why ancestors would continue to be involved in the lives of the living. Thus, ancestors' personhood makes us understand that they are able to communicate with the living concerning social and moral matters which then grants them the platform to pursue moral excellence.

The idea that ancestors can influence individuals and the community raises important questions about the relationship between ancestral influence and intent, and individual moral agency. For example, in the Bantu societies, some individuals believe that ancestors can direct their life path. This could be seen in a case where someone is said to have an ancestral calling. In such cases if an individual decides to take an alternative path and pursues anything else other than what the ancestors have destined for them the result is often misfortune and punishment from the ancestors.



In some cases, punishment could involve being ostracized from the community which in such communities is akin to death. Existing outside of the community could mean that one is no longer a person and as revealed earlier, a person cannot exist alone. Another example could be the case where ancestors could order someone to cause harm to another person for the sake of restoring communal harmony that is, avenge the death of a family member by killing the perpetrator. Hence, individuals may be compelled to obey the ancestors' wishes against their own desires.

Furthermore, the question of what is right and wrong becomes unclear and difficult to reconcile. Say the individual carries out the ancestors' instruction against their own will, in such acts of harm, which of the persons between the ancestor and the living individual is held morally responsible for the action? These two examples demonstrate that there is tension between ancestral authority and individual agency. One may be led to ask the question, where do we draw the line between ancestors' authority and individual moral agency? Does ancestral authority limit individual moral autonomy? Based on such questions the need for clarity concerning the extent of individual moral autonomy in such societies becomes evident.

Thus, this paper explores whether ancestral authority within relational frameworks in African traditional societies can limit individual moral autonomy pertaining to an individual's life trajectory and moral decisions. The paper argues that since ancestors are believed to promote social harmony and well-being, certain forms of ancestral authority may undermine individual moral autonomy which makes the relationship between ancestral authority and individual moral agency complicated.

**Keywords:** Relationality, Ancestors, Moral Agency, Autonomy, Personhood.



# **Man, and the Spirit: An Investigation into the Dialectical Coexistence of Man and the Spiritual in Igbo-African Ontology**

The Igbo world is a plurality of the material and the spiritual. Matter is respected as a foundational part of reality but does not exhaust the full scope of reality in the Igbo world.

Ndigbo recognise a nonmaterial dimension to reality – the spiritual. The spiritual among Ndigbo, gives meaning to the material; bestows life on the material, and complements it to form reality as known to Ndigbo. Among Ndigbo, the material is neither denigrated nor does it exist for the spiritual. The spiritual exists at the service of the material. When material when being is threatened among Ndigbo, the community cherry-picks among the spirits and enters into dealings with the one that serves it best. While Ndigbo would normally appease a belligerent spirit, Ndigbo would have no qualms in doing away with the spiritual entity that has failed in its duty of protecting them.

Although Ndigbos consider man to be a composite of matter and spirit, Ndigbos do not consider man to be subservient to his spiritual part or any spirit beyond the ultimately beyond the human community. They are never an otherworldly people. The spiritual and the material all serve the human community which is the ultimate value among Ndigbo.

## Movements of Meaning: Relational Immortality and Afterlife in African Philosophy of Religion

This paper advances a major theoretical reconstruction of the African conception of the afterlife through the framework I propose as the horizontal and vertical movements of human existence, two complementary trajectories grounded in the relational ontologies that structure African philosophical reflection and which together disclose the existential and normative conditions under which human life acquires meaning and flourishing becomes genuinely attainable.

At the centre of this reconstruction lies what I designate the theory of relational immortality, a concept that reframes African reflections on death, ancestry, and continuity as a coherent philosophical account of how meaningful existence extends beyond biological finitude through enduring relational efficacy. I argue that human existence unfolds along two mutually implicative axes such that the horizontal movement represents the ethical-communal trajectory within the visible social world where personhood is not a fixed metaphysical substance but a progressive relational achievement realised through moral responsibility, communal participation, and sustained commitment to the well-being of others. Within this domain, meaning emerges through the cultivation of solidarity, reciprocity, justice, and service, strengthening the relational networks that sustain communal life, while failures of ethical responsibility weaken those networks and threaten the meaningfulness of existence itself.

Complementing this ethical trajectory is the vertical movement, which designates the existential deepening of human life toward the invisible spiritual order that informs African metaphysical thought, where the ancestors—understood as the living-dead—exist not as distant or detached spirits but as relationally present mediators who sustain moral order and preserve cosmic equilibrium within a dynamic continuum linking the visible and invisible realms.

These movements converge in what I term relational immortality, the central theoretical concept developed in this paper. Relational immortality does not signify the indefinite persistence of an isolated soul nor the static survival of individual consciousness after death; rather, it denotes the enduring relational efficacy through which a person's moral achievements, communal contributions, and existential commitments continue to shape communal life beyond physical death. Immortality in this sense emerges as an ongoing relational presence within the moral and spiritual life of the community, where influence, guidance, protection, and memory persist across generational boundaries within a continuously unfolding relational field. The development of this framework proceeds through a conversational–complementary–integrative methodology grounded within African philosophical discourse itself.

The conversational dimension draws upon the work of Jonathan O. Chimakonam, whose conversational philosophy conceives philosophical inquiry as a dynamic process of arumaristic dialogue through which ideas are critically interrogated and creatively extended. Complementarity is informed by the thought of Innocent Asouzu and his principle of *Ibuanyidanda*, which affirms that all elements of reality exist within a network of mutual complementation where nothing stands alone. Integrative humanism, developed by Godfrey Okechukwu Ozumba, further reinforces this framework by insisting on the unity of the rational, communal, and spiritual dimensions of existence within a holistic vision of reality. These methodological perspectives are brought into sustained engagement with foundational insights from key African philosophers whose work shapes contemporary discourse on personhood and afterlife.

The relational axiom articulated by John S. Mbiti—often summarised as “I am because we are”—anchors the communal structure of African ontology, while Ifeanyi Anthony Menkiti argues that personhood is gradually achieved through ethical excellence and communal participation rather than given at birth. Kwame Gyekye develops a moderated communitarian perspective that preserves the rational autonomy of the individual while affirming the formative role of community in shaping identity.

Through this internal philosophical conversation, the horizontal and vertical movements emerge not as externally imposed categories but as analytic clarifications of themes already implicit within African metaphysical and ethical thought. Within the horizontal movement, flourishing occurs when individual purpose becomes harmonised with collective well-being, generating a relational equilibrium in which ethical conduct sustains communal cohesion; yet this dimension remains vulnerable because it depends upon human agency and social conditions, and thus ethical failure, relational rupture, or communal disintegration can lead existence toward profound meaninglessness. The vertical movement, however, situates human life within a wider spiritual continuum that transcends these limitations without negating the ethical demands of earthly life.

Ancestors remain relationally present as custodians of moral order and mediators between human communities and the wider cosmic structure, ensuring that ethical conduct in the present remains oriented toward enduring relational significance. From this perspective, the transition to ancestral status is not automatic but conditional upon the quality of one's horizontal life: individuals whose lives exemplify moral integrity, communal responsibility, and sustained relational contribution become integrated into the ancestral realm, while those whose lives fail to cultivate meaningful relational bonds risk fading into insignificance rather than attaining enduring presence. Relational immortality therefore transcends both individualistic eschatologies and purely symbolic remembrance by describing a condition in which the moral consequences of one's life continue to shape communal existence beyond death. Influence persists not as isolated survival but as participation within an expanding relational network linking past, present, and future generations.

This framework also reveals an important theoretical asymmetry: the horizontal movement remains susceptible to meaninglessness because it depends upon fragile human actions and social structures, whereas the vertical movement situates existence within a broader horizon of spiritual continuity that orients human life toward enduring significance. Belief in the afterlife therefore functions not merely as metaphysical speculation but as an existential resource that provides hope, resilience, and ethical motivation. Human suffering can acquire redemptive depth when interpreted within a larger spiritual narrative, while the prospect of relational continuity encourages individuals to cultivate lives whose moral influence may endure across generations. The theory therefore reframes African conceptions of the afterlife not as speculative cosmology but as a profound ethical vision in which human flourishing is realised through the integration of communal responsibility and spiritual orientation. On this basis, the paper advances three major theoretical contributions to African philosophy of religion: first, the horizontal–vertical duality as a new analytic framework capable of clarifying the internal coherence of African conceptions of life, death, and ancestral continuity.

Second, the concept of relational immortality as a philosophically robust alternative to both Western individualistic doctrines of soul-survival and materialist accounts that deny post-mortem significance.

Third, the demonstration that belief in the afterlife within African traditions actively cultivates ethical responsibility, communal resilience, and existential courage rather than encouraging escapism or fatalism. In conclusion, the African conception of the afterlife, reconstructed through these movements of meaning, reveals a distinctive philosophical vision in which immortality is not the solitary persistence of an isolated self but the enduring vitality of relationships that bind generations across visible and invisible worlds.

Death does not extinguish meaning but transforms the moral achievements of an exemplary life into an ongoing relational presence within the communal order. Through this framework, relational immortality emerges as the ultimate affirmation of meaning in African philosophy of religion: the idea that an ethically lived life culminates not in oblivion but in enduring participation within the ever-expanding relational field that unites the living, the ancestors, and the generations yet to come.

**Keywords:** Relational immortality, African philosophy of religion, horizontal movement, vertical movement, ancestral continuity, human flourishing.

## **Between Fetishized Christianity and African Religious Agency: African Traditional Religion and the Reconfiguration of Christian Meaning**

The contemporary effort to transform the philosophy of religion into a genuinely global and inclusive field requires more than simply incorporating non-Western religious traditions into existing conceptual frameworks. It also demands a critical examination of the intellectual assumptions that have historically structured the discipline. Much of classical philosophy of religion has developed within the theological and philosophical horizons of Western Christianity, focusing primarily on questions concerning the rationality of belief in God, the problem of evil, and the coherence of doctrines such as divine omnipotence or salvation. While these questions remain philosophically significant, they reflect a particular historical and cultural context that does not adequately capture the diversity of ways in which religious traditions are lived, interpreted, and transformed across the world.

African Christianity offers a particularly illuminating case for rethinking these assumptions. The phenomenon is often interpreted through two reductive frameworks. On the one hand, it is viewed as a localized reception of Western Christian doctrine, adapted to African cultural environments but essentially continuous with European theological traditions (Walls 1996; Sanneh 1989). On the other hand, it is frequently interpreted as a problematic form of syncretism in which Christian orthodoxy is diluted or distorted by the persistence of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) (Mbiti 1969). Both interpretations, however, obscure a deeper philosophical reality. African Christianity is not merely the reception of a foreign religious system nor the accidental mixture of incompatible traditions. Rather, it is a dynamic site of religious agency in which African believers actively reinterpret, transform, and reconfigure Christian meaning within the metaphysical, spiritual, and existential horizons of African life (Bediako 1995; Kalu 2008).

This paper develops this argument by drawing on the critical insights of the Cameroonian philosopher Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, particularly in his influential work *Christianisme sans fétiches*. Eboussi-Boulaga provides one of the most penetrating philosophical critiques of Christianity in the African context. His central claim is that missionary Christianity in Africa became “fetishized” when it was presented as a ready-made system of sacred authority detached from African cultural and philosophical horizons. In this sense, the concept of fetish does not refer to a traditional object of worship but to any religious form that acquires sacred authority while escaping critical reflection and human freedom (Eboussi-Boulaga 1981). Within the colonial context, Christianity was frequently introduced as an absolute and universal truth external to African cultures. The Bible, ecclesiastical institutions, Western theological categories, and even the figure of Christ were presented as transcendent authorities that demanded submission rather than interpretation. According to Eboussi-Boulaga, this process produced a form of spiritual alienation in which African believers were encouraged to abandon their own religious traditions while simultaneously being denied the intellectual authority to reinterpret Christian faith within their own cultural frameworks. Faith thus became closely associated with obedience rather than with freedom and critical reflection.

Yet Eboussi-Boulaga’s critique is not simply a rejection of Christianity. Rather, it is a call for what he describes as a “Christianity without fetishes,” in which believers reclaim their responsibility as interpreters of religious meaning. Such a Christianity would not involve either a simple return to pre-Christian religious traditions or an uncritical adherence to Western theological systems. Instead, it would require a process of critical reappropriation in which African Christians actively reinterpret the Christian message within their own cultural and historical contexts.

Building on this conceptual framework, this paper will argue that African Traditional Religions have played a crucial role in enabling this process of reinterpretation. Far from disappearing under the influence of missionary Christianity, ATRs have continued to shape the metaphysical categories through which many African communities understand reality.



African religious worldviews are often organized around concepts such as vital force, spiritual causality, ancestral mediation, and relational ontology (Tempels 1945; Kagame 1976; Mbiti 1969). Within this framework, reality is understood not primarily as a collection of static substances but as a dynamic network of interacting forces that influence the well-being of individuals and communities.

In such a worldview, the relationship between visible and invisible dimensions of existence becomes central to religious life. Misfortune, illness, and social conflict are often interpreted as expressions of disrupted spiritual relationships or hostile invisible forces. Religious practices aim to restore harmony by re-establishing connections with ancestors, spiritual mediators, and divine powers. These metaphysical assumptions profoundly shaped the ways in which African communities interpreted the Christian message when it first entered their societies.

As a result, African Christianity has frequently reconfigured the meaning of central Christian symbols. In much of Western theology, Christ is primarily understood as a juridical redeemer who resolves the problem of sin and guilt through sacrificial atonement. In many African Christian contexts, however, Christ is experienced above all as a supreme spiritual mediator who possesses the power to heal, protect, and overcome hostile spiritual forces. This reinterpretation reflects the metaphysical logic of African religious ontology, in which spiritual mediation and the management of invisible forces are central to the pursuit of human flourishing.

These transformations are particularly visible in the rapid expansion of Pentecostal, prophetic, and independent Christian movements across the African continent. Practices such as healing ministries, deliverance rituals, prophecy, and spiritual warfare play a central role in many African churches (Kalu 2008; Gifford 1998). From the perspective of Western theological orthodoxy, such practices are sometimes dismissed as remnants of traditional religion or as distortions of Christian doctrine.

Yet such interpretations fail to recognize the philosophical coherence underlying these developments. Rather than representing theological confusion, these practices can be understood as metaphysical translations of Christian soteriology into categories that resonate with African experiences of spiritual reality.

This perspective invites a reconsideration of the concept of syncretism. Instead of viewing syncretism as a form of religious impurity, it may be understood as a process of epistemic creativity through which communities negotiate the encounter between different symbolic systems. African Christianity thus illustrates how religious traditions evolve when they enter new cultural and philosophical environments. The encounter between Christianity and African Traditional Religions has generated new forms of religious meaning that respond to African concerns about protection, healing, prosperity, and existential flourishing. At the same time, the paper follows Eboussi-Boulaga in issuing a critical warning. The Africanization of Christianity does not automatically eliminate the risk of religious fetishization. New forms of fetishization may emerge when religious practices become dominated by magical thinking, fear-based deliverance rituals, or the commercialization of spiritual power. In such cases, religious authority once again escapes critical reflection and becomes an instrument of dependency rather than freedom.

A genuinely “Christianity without fetishes” therefore requires more than cultural translation. It requires the cultivation of critical freedom within religious communities. African believers must remain active subjects who engage their religious traditions through interpretation, reflection, and responsible decision-making. Faith, in this sense, cannot be reduced either to passive submission to inherited doctrines or to uncritical acceptance of new spiritual practices.

By examining African Christianity through the lens of Eboussi-Boulaga's critique and the metaphysical framework of African Traditional Religions, this paper contributes to the broader project of transforming the philosophy of religion into a genuinely global discipline. It demonstrates that African religious experiences offer not only empirical case studies but also theoretical insights capable of reshaping the conceptual foundations of the field. African Christianity reveals how religious traditions are continually reinterpreted through processes of cultural translation, philosophical reflection, and human agency.

Recognizing these dynamics is essential for a philosophy of religion that seeks to move beyond its historically Eurocentric foundations. Rather than treating non-Western religious expressions as peripheral variations of established traditions, a global philosophy of religion must acknowledge the plurality of metaphysical frameworks through which human beings engage the sacred. In this sense, African Christianity provides an important example of how religious traditions can be creatively reconfigured when believers assume responsibility for interpreting the symbols and narratives that shape their spiritual lives.

Ultimately, the African experience of Christianity raises a fundamental philosophical question: how can religious traditions remain sources of meaning and transcendence without becoming fetishes that suppress human freedom? Addressing this question requires recognizing believers not as passive recipients of sacred truths but as active agents in the ongoing creation of religious meaning. African Christianity, shaped by the encounter between Christian narratives and African religious ontologies, therefore offers an important contribution to the ongoing effort to reimagine the philosophy of religion as a truly global and inclusive field.

**Keywords:** African Philosophy of Religion, African Traditional Religion (ATR), Religious Agency, Decolonization of Christianity, Religious Syncretism, Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga.

# **Meaning and Human Flourishing in African Traditional Religions (ATRs) and Christian Religion: A Philosophical Inquiry**

This paper explores how ATRs and Christian religion understand human flourishing and meaning in/of life, asking whether these traditions offer rival, complementary, or mutually illuminating visions of the good human life. Rather than treating ATRs as mere pre philosophical systems of ritual and Christianity as the sole bearer of theo-philosophical reflection, the paper argues that both traditions contain rich and robust moral and metaphysical resources for thinking about what makes life meaningful. Recent works in African philosophy have shown that ATRs can sustain a robust philosophical reflection on God, spiritual realities, personhood, moral status, and the final good, especially through concepts such as relational personhood, vitality, communion, and character. The central argument is that human flourishing in both ATRs and the Christian religion is best understood neither as private happiness nor as material success, but as a participation in rightly ordered relationships with God, or spiritual realities, with community, with the living-dead, moral traditions, and one's own developing character. Meaning is never private; happiness is a meaning, and meaning is never a closed system.

It is found and could be lost in the circle of creative struggle to live and to die within a continuous, unbreakable web of relationships, which supports the argument that death is not the end of meaning. In ATRs, flourishing is often linked to active participation in communal and spiritual networks, whereas in Christian philosophy it is associated with the beatitudes, virtue, love, and communion. Although these traditions differ in ontology, Soteriology, and ritual mediation, both resist radically individualistic accounts of meaning and instead place moral formation, hope, gratitude, fortitude, and belonging near the center of a well-lived life. Hence, this paper develops a comparative, intercultural,

conversational philosophical framework for engaging ATRs and the Christian religion on the nature of human flourishing and meaning. It argues that ATRs can deepen Christian philosophical discussion of embodiment, communal identity, and the moral significance of spiritual presence, while Christian philosophy can sharpen reflection on transcendence, virtue, suffering, and ultimate fulfillment. By bringing African philosophy into sustained conversation with Western philosophy of religion, ethics, and Christian thought, the paper aims to show that the search for meaning is neither culturally uniform nor philosophically closed; it does not end with death, nor simply start with birth. Human beings are born into the search for meaning and die into the new medium of the same search. The search for meaning is also enriched in tradition, encapsulated in the past, lived in the present, and projected into the future. Meaning is time itself and, simultaneously, timeless. Human flourishing is meaning, not merely meaningful or meaningless, and it is relational and spiritually textured.

# **Ancestors, Reincarnation, and Environmental Stewardship: Philosophical Reflections on Abua Indigenous Cosmology for Human Flourishing**

Reality in African indigenous religious tradition does not consist solely on the visible world of human beings but on the interconnected relationship between the physical world and the invisible realm of spiritual beings. Within this worldview, life is understood not simply as an isolated biological event but as part of a continuous cycle that connects the living, the ancestors, and unborn generations together. This metaphysical worldview in Africa undoubtedly shapes communal identity, moral responsibility, and human relationship with nature, eventually leading to human flourishing. One particular place in which this cosmological orientation evidently manifests but whose indigenous religious wisdom remains underexplored is the Abua people of Rivers State of Nigeria.

Unlike the Hindus and Buddhists who understand reincarnation typically in the sense of endless cycles of rebirth governed by karma; the Abua people believe in ancestral reincarnation in which the dead - especially morally upright ancestors return to the world of the living through newborn members of the family or deceased relatives within the same family lineage under what Mbiti (2015) describes as a form of “partial immortality” - where the dead are re-experienced through names. Hence, in Yoruba cosmology for instance, names such as Babatunde (the father has returned) and Yetunde (the mother has returned) express this continuity. The same thing applies in Igbo cosmology, where the concept of *ilọ ụwa* (re-entering the world) is associated with familial reincarnation in which children are perceived as the return of departed relatives (Arinze, 2009; Okere, 2018).

However, among the Abua cultural enclave, a more complex form of this reality of ancestral reincarnation is expressed through numerous personal names such as Namasi (you are welcome), Namarukeen (you have returned again?), Kamughmun (do not die again), Kubimun (do not disappoint us), Kakimun (do not go again), Tolrayoor (live with us), Odemarighe-el (the father has returned), Oniin-ayoormarighe-el (our mother has returned), etc. These names rooted in the belief in ancestral reincarnation embodied identity, lived reality and vividly reflect a worldview where the dead return among the living, thereby linking ancestral continuity with present existence. The central purpose of this paper therefore is to critically examine how Abua belief in ancestral reincarnation evidently expressed through personal names provides philosophical resources for promoting environmental stewardship and human flourishing within African philosophy of religion. The key philosophical questions that arise are: How do Abua people in Nigeria conceive ancestral reincarnation as a spiritual reality? And to what extent does the belief in ancestral reincarnation influence a view of life that contributes to environmental responsibility and human flourishing?

In responding to these critical questions, the study adopts a number of philosophical approaches. The hermeneutic approach is used to interpret the meanings embedded in Abua indigenous cosmology, particularly belief on ancestral reincarnation and environment. Through conceptual analysis, the study critically examines the philosophical implications of this belief for environmental stewardship and human flourishing. The study also engages eco-theological inquiry, and comparative eschatology to illuminate how Abua cosmology contributes to wider debates on theology, ecology, and cultural resilience. Comparative theology, as defined by Clooney (2010), is not about proving one tradition superior to another but about deep learning across boundaries. In this case, the conversation reveals both tension and potential enrichment.

This paper argues that the Abua belief in ancestral reincarnation, expressed through traditional personal naming, reflects a form of spiritual continuity that blurs the boundary between death and life and in which those who lead good life and are venerated as ancestors after death return to the physical world.



This worldview may be described as a form of existential “escapology,” in which death does not represent final annihilation but a transition within a continuing cycle of communal existence. The significance of this Abua cosmology is that while it affirms the interconnected relationship between the seen and unseen worlds, it undoubtedly challenges the Christian doctrine of resurrection and the finality of judgment, raising critical questions about the destiny of the earth and human flourishing.

More significantly, the Abua belief system also fosters a sense of ecological accountability. The critical issue here is: if the departed are expected to return, then the earth must be preserved as a habitable and dignified place. Such an outlook implicitly frames ancestral reincarnation as an ethical model of environmental stewardship, contrasting with strands of Christian eschatology that prioritize heavenly destiny over earthly care. Within this context, the Abua indigenous ecological ethic exposes a tension between the belief in ancestral reincarnation and strands of Christian eschatology. In Christian teaching, the emphasis lies on resurrection, final judgment, and the eternal destiny of souls in heaven or hell. Such eschatology some scholars explain sometimes encourages believers to treat the earth as a temporary dwelling, thereby downplaying the urgency of ecological responsibility (Gnanakan, 2018; Nche, 2021). By contrast, the Abua conviction that the dead return makes the earth central to human destiny, thereby encouraging human flourishing. What emerges from this contrast is not simply a doctrinal disagreement but a profound divergence in ethical orientation: where resurrection theology risks otherworldliness, while ancestral reincarnation theology insists on earth-centered stewardship.

One significant gap in scholarship which the research seeks to fill is that despite the growing attention to such beliefs across Africa, the Abua indigenous religious wisdom remains largely neglected and philosophically unexamined. This neglect is problematic on two fronts. First, it contributes to a distorted picture of African religious thought, privileging larger ethnic traditions like Yoruba and Igbo while erasing smaller voices.



Second, it highlights the ecological dimension of ancestral reincarnation, offering a model of environmental responsibility rooted in indigenous cosmology. Third, it engages comparative theology to show how ancestral reincarnation can challenge and enrich Christian eschatology, especially by re-centering the earth within theological imagination.

In this way, the study argues that Abua reincarnation is not a marginal curiosity but a vital theological resource for an age marked by ecological crisis and eschatological uncertainty. Furthermore, the research becomes even more striking when examined in the context of contemporary ecological scholarship. In recent decades, eco-theologians and environmental ethicists have argued that humanity's ecological crisis is not simply scientific or political but also deeply spiritual (Rasmussen, 2013; Conradie, 2016). Accordingly, for communities like the Abua, ancestral reincarnation introduces indigenous religious dimension to ecological responsibility. If the dead are expected to return, then the living has an obligation to preserve the earth for future habitation. This belief resonates strongly with global discourses on environmental sustainability (Nolt, 2015; Norton, 2018). While Western ecological ethics often appeal to abstract principles of rights or duties, the Abua perspective grounds environmental care in an eschatological expectation: the land must remain habitable because the ancestors will one day rejoin their descendants to live with them. Thus, this paper ultimately argues that ancestral reincarnation in Abua cosmology embodies a distinctive theological resource for reimagining ecological responsibility and human flourishing in an era of global environmental crisis.

**Keywords:** Abua cosmology, Ancestors, reincarnation, indigenous eschatology, environmental stewardship, human flourishing.

# **Private Qualia and God in Traditional African Religious Experiences**

Traditional African religious beliefs and experiences have two central features. They are essentially hierarchical in nature and are mostly expressed in outward and public performances. Their hierarchical systems put God at the apex of creation and reality, with other entities beneath him. In this sense, he is unapproachable. This distance between God, as the supreme deity, and ordinary everyday people leads to a detached experience of God accompanied by impersonal relations with him. The public nature of religious belief and performance is a continuation of individuals' boundedness to the shared good. While private and individual religious performances are possible, they command less significance in respect of the identifiable good as such good is complete when exercised in shared settings such as the community.

This approach leaves no room for individualized qualitative experience of God's goodness or benevolence. It deprives the adherent of intense feelings of God's righteousness or attention to the individual. Deprived of such an experience, it may be proposed, the individual cannot develop a personal account of God and loyalty thereto. Without such an experience, it can be plausibly suspected that an individual within such a setting cannot owe her goodness derivatively from God's. Neither can her goodness be directly inspired by God's. Her goodness can only be drawn from the personal relationships she has with other members of the community and those who are within the network of what her human relations can access. These are the yet to be born, the recently deceased, and the ancestors (below five generations). Excluded from this access are the founding fathers of the clan and all those who belong to the spiritual realm that transcends five generations before the birth of the said individual.

Since this access is indirect or derivative through some other mode of descent, it follows that the individual can never have any direct experience of supreme powers beyond the axis of her equally direct relationality. If this is the case, there are several implications to be drawn from this.

The first is that the African agent, within her religious context, cannot be directly inspired by experiences of God. Secondly, it follows from the first, that the absence of this direct inspiration is replaced by another set of inspiration. Thirdly, the replacing inspiration is qualitatively inferior to the direct experience of God and more prone to error. Fourthly, the absence of a direct relationship with God makes that God partially unknowable to the African agent or believer. A plausible way of dealing with these observations is to assert, as Kwasi Wiredu has done, the centrality of humans in the development of their own ethics. Goodness, ethics, moral values, and well-being are, after all to be seen as not necessarily dependent on some idea of the goodness of God. While this may be available to the atheistic strand of the African worldview, it is not the sort of argument to be invoked in this debate.

This is simply because the idea of God is, anthropologically and philosophically, well-established. It is not an artificial idea. If it is to be argued that there is a priority of humans having the right to form their own ethics without invoking God, it must also follow that such individuals would agree that an entity such as God does not exist. What all this points to is the need to evaluate how indigenous believers may claim the right to invoke God for their own inspiration as good people. Two alternatives seem plausible on the current depiction of traditional religious belief. The first is that the individual believer could argue that God's goodness and desires for her, qua individual, are in the law of God which are to be found in human law. This position is close to Jordan B. Ngubane's argument that *umtheto we sintu* (the law of humans) is derived from the law of nature (*umtheto wemvelo*). All things that humans value, the argument reiterates, are so valued because they have traces of the supreme being. An alternative view is one that would refuse to entertain a distinction between what can be seen as the good by humans and another set of good inspired by God. This view would see life in its totality and insist that everything that Africans do are already within the religious realm, are inspired by it, and seek to serve it.

The search for, qualia, the argument may be extended, is an unproductive compartmentalization of both religious and individual experience of life and religiosity. This view is what led John Mbiti to declare on the first page of his now-classical attempt to betroth philosophy to religion, that Africans are notoriously religious. I am not convinced that either way of proceeding is satisfactory. As a preface to the demonstration of the inadequacy of both alternatives, I will start by spelling the importance of qualia for a believer in relation to God. Such an experience is necessary for making sense of religious belief and the subsequent conduct of the believer as a believer.

This will be followed by an account of what the absence of qualia has been and what its implications are, for the individual goodness of believers in the African religious tradition. I will then seek to address the alternatives that try to sidestep the importance of qualia. My aim is not to show that they are untrue renditions of African epistemologies in traditional religious belief. On the contrary, I wish to demonstrate their inadequacies in accounting for what a religious believer has to be – qua believer in God. I will then end by attempting to demonstrate why traditional religious belief, in Africa, may benefit from an account of qualia in respect of how the moral agency of believers is formed. This agency is one that is deeply rooted in the reality and wishes of God as experienced in the depths of being African by Africans, in relation to their God.

If my position is successful, it will produce a believer who is epistemologically richer than the traditional account. Such a believer is also capable of directly invoking God for the justification of her moral status as a believer. Such an option is not currently available within the traditional religious system.

# **African and Afro-Diasporic Spiritualities as Lived Philosophies of Meaning and Belonging**

I argue that African and Afro-Diasporic spiritualities constitute lived philosophical frameworks for understanding religious coping, identity, meaning-making, belonging, and well-being, both within the African continent and across its diasporas. I focus on African spiritual ontologies, often articulated through concepts like vital force, communal personhood, and relational existence. These ontologies, as extensions of African Traditional Religions, not only challenge dominant Western individualist and dualist paradigms, but demonstrate how African and Afro-Diasporic communities make meaning in life through religious beliefs and practices. In spite of religious syncretism and transformations, these ontologies continue to adapt, search and construct meaning under conditions of displacement and modernity. The paper ultimately contends that African and Afro-Diasporic spiritualities offer indispensable resources for a global philosophy of religion.

## Òrìṣà-inspired Theory of Meaningfulness in African and Afro-Brazilian Spiritualities

### Background / Research Problem Justification

The African God has been portrayed as silent and hidden (Lougheed et al. 2024). Nevertheless, this does not constitute grounds for disbelief among Africans. Even after being ‘transferred’ to the Americas due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the African limited-God continues to be hidden and silent. On this showing, it becomes doubtful if such a God is capable of providing meaning, as Aribiah D. Attoe, the foremost proponent of the African God-purpose theory concedes. Although Attoe (2023) is the first to propose the African God-purpose theory of meaningfulness, the outlook is redolent in the works of other theorists like Metz (2019); Mulgan (2015); and Poettcker (2015). This is because in African and Afro-Brazilian spiritualities, there is no direct relationship with God but rather the relationship is with divinities or òrìṣàs who engage humans in the business of meaning through occasional sessions of spirit possession and during divination (Ofuasia 2024; 2026).

For instance, during a session, and while casting his Ifá divination chain on behalf of a client to source meaning from the Yorùbá male deity of knowledge and hidden things, Òrúnmilà, an Ifá priest soon encountered what may be described as an instance of spiritual incorporation. This situation has been described as a state of “dynamic relaxation” – “a perfected state of mind where intense concentration results in a state of complete repose” (Beier 1975, 56). This is a state of semi-divinity, and it does not come as a surprise when Suzanne Wenger says that: “All these activities of olorishas: ritual, divination, sacrifice, and magic are entirely a means. This final purpose of orisha worship is to extend the natural limits of human experience into the sphere of the metaphysical. Man becomes more than man” (see Beier 1975, 45).

Although Ifá priests try to eliminate sessions where possession occurs, since they fear it may affect the outcome of the divination, they nevertheless experience these occasional states of possession that are central to olóriṣà spirituality (Ogunnaike 2015).

Similar cases of spiritual incorporation have also been documented among the olóriṣàs of Candomblé Queto or Nagô in Brazil. When reporting the utterances made by the olóriṣà that was possessed by a deity, “they will never refer to them in general but will always specify the orixá of a particular person: “Julio’s Xangô did/said . . .” The personal nature of each person’s orixá becomes apparent in how they are envisioned by their respective followers” (Porcher 2024, 7). In articulating how the òriṣà, which inheres an olóriṣà are known, Marlene de Oliveira Cunha’s (1986, 79-80) explanation is helpful: for Oxóssi, there is the gesture made with the hands that resembles a bow and arrow, a hunting instrument; for Iansã, the gesture of holding up the skirt, causing the wind to blow to scare away the “eguns”, i.e. the dead; for Ogum, the gesture of thrusting out the chest that resembles a physical combat; for Xangô, the majestic gesture of raising his arms to greet those present; for Obaluaê, the curved posture, showing his closeness to the ancestors; for Oxum, the gestures of caring for the body, exalting her beauty and vanity; for Iemanjá, the gesture of rocking, which represents the figure of the mother.

There is a tradition, which has been used to justify and validate why some of the òriṣàs of African and Afro-Brazilian spiritualities occasionally possess devotees. Once upon a time the heaven and earth were fused, so gods and humans could interact. However, a tradition explains that one human touched the sky with a dirty hand and caused the separation between Heaven and Earth with the gods retreating to Heaven (see Prandi 2001). Although withdrawn, these gods sulked and longed to reunite with humans. They decided to make their grievances known to the Higher God, Olódūmarè. Olódūmarè consented to their request to occasionally return to earth on the sole condition that “they would have to take on material bodies of their devotees” (Prandi 2001, 526). The ‘descension’ of the òriṣàs on their devotees entails the temporary displacement of a person’s conscious self by a more power, immaterial being during a state of trance” (Seligman 2014).

## Thesis

The incorporation or spiritual possession of an olórìṣà by their òrìṣà is not only a validation of the wishes of the deities to return to earth occasionally but leaves much room for the development of the often-overlooked patient-centred meaningfulness that is òrìṣà-inspired vis-à-vis the popular way of discussing meaning which is mostly agent-centred (see Attoe 2023; Metz 2013, 2020; Balogun 2020).

## Methodology

Critical analysis and hermeneutics are central to the task of this research. The former will assist with scrutinizing assumptions, through logical precisions for the sake of clarity. Here, the distinction between meaning-patency and agency will benefit just as Attoe's notion of meaning-patency is offered critical exploration. The latter is also sacrosanct because it offers avenue of teasing out our relevant portions of African and Afro-Brazilian ritual archives for curating an òrìṣà-inspired theory of meaning, which this research seeks to foreground.

## Article Synopsis

Aside the introduction which amplifies the research problem and its pertinence, there are two other important sections cardinal to reinforcing the thesis of this research. The first focuses on Attoe's notion of meaning-patency and what implication it holds for the òrìṣà-inspired theory of meaning which I develop in the second part.

**Attoe's Notion of Meaning-Patency:** At this juncture, it is crucial to distinguish a meaning agent from a meaning patient: While the former "pursues or strives for some meaning-ful pursuits, the latter on the other hand, is one who does not strive for meaning but receives meaning via certain acts perpetrated by others than himself" (Attoe 2024, 1445). Although Aribiah Attoe maintains that it is possible for humans to be both meaning agents and meaning patients, his analysis has not explored deeply how spiritual possession and similar experiences in African spirituality can account for the latter, especially.



It is helpful to point out that while individuals are meaning agents seeking ways to inject and maximise living, they can also become meaning patients when they are possessed by an òrìṣà: “As the possession episode draws to a close, initiates frequently report experiencing a dual sensation of well-being and emptiness, often expressed through bouts of crying or laughter” (Porcher 2024, 57-8). Furthermore, those who engage in Ifá divination are also able to receive meaning from the insights gained from Òrúnmìlà. These received insights add to human flourishing and well-being.

Toward an Òrìṣà-inspired theory of meaningfulness: Most olóṛìṣà who have experienced these ‘sessions’ of spiritual incorporation highlighted above, have increased their understanding of life as not only transient but ephemeral (Ogunnaike 2015). Some have been challenged to alter what seems as important life goals and aspirations, following rare encounters with the òrìṣà. A resounding illustration of how òrìṣà-mediated meaningfulness works is the transformation of Sussane Wenger, who experienced encounters with Òṣún, the Yorùbá female deity of beauty, fertility, and fresh waters. Other reports affirm that she was possessed by the Deity, took the name, Adunni Olóṛìṣà, lived to be 93 years in the Grove until her death in 2009 (see Loop 2025). This implies that she found purpose through her creative art contributions to the Grove, which later became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2005 (see UNESCO 2026). It seems before her encounter with Òṣún, Wenger’s quest for meaning, well-being and flourishing was ‘hanging.’ The encounter clearly proves that meaning-patency not only persists in African spirituality for life’s meaningfulness, flourishing, and well-being but also commands more intellectual attention and study among academics.

## **Conclusion**

As the God-purpose theory of meaning is a limited-half focusing on meaning-agents, as other theories of meaningfulness do, it has dominated the attention of academics leading to vegetative explorations of meaning-patency.

As implied in the previous paragraphs, Òrìṣà-inspired theory of meaningfulness is not merely about the fulfilment of destiny or alignment with the dictates of divinities and spirits as the African God-purpose theory of meaning entails. Òrìṣà-inspired theory of meaningfulness discloses how individuals can both be meaning agents through personal and conventional approaches to life and also meaning patients who can be possessed and received guidance for flourishing and well-being from divinity.

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## Ritual Phenomenology and Transcendent Meaning: Reconstructing the African Conception of the Good Life

This study examines the philosophical foundations of what African conceive as the good life, through the lens of ritual phenomenology and transcendent meaning. It situates African ritual practices not merely as cultural expressions or symbolic performances, but as epistemic and ontological sites where human beings encounter, interpret as well as participate in a layered reality that includes the visible, the invisible, the communal and the transcendent. Against dominant Western philosophical frameworks that often privilege individual autonomy, rational calculation and material well-being as primary indicators of human flourishing, this paper argues that African thought systems articulate a more integrative and relational vision of the good life, grounded in ritual participation, moral responsibility and spiritual continuity between the living, the ancestors and the yet-to-be-born.

The primary problem for which this inquiry is being carried out, lies in the fact that most contemporary discourses on well-being and human development, be it in philosophy, public policy or economics, seem to limit flourishing to measurable indicators such as health, political rights and income. While these dimensions are undoubtedly necessary and fundamental, they however fail to capture the full moral and metaphysical depth of African understanding of personhood, fulfilment and meaning. This study therefore identifies a persistent loophole in the literature, where African rituals are either treated as pre-modern survivals, symbolic ritualization, or sociological tools of cohesion, rather than as philosophically rich modes of world-disclosure. By focusing on ritual phenomenology, this study attempts to rebuild African rituals as experiential models by which individuals and communities understand the nature of reality, the moral structure of existence and the supreme purpose of human life.

The central objective of this study therefore, is to demonstrate that ritual, within the context of African philosophical traditions, functions as a means of transcendent meaning that forms the ethical, ontological and communal dimensions of the good life. Ritual is here demonstrated to be constitutive of moral knowledge itself instead of being peripheral to moral reasoning. By so doing, in the course of participating in rites such as rites of passage, healing ceremonies, burials, ancestral veneration and communal festivals, individuals are enrolled into a moral universe where the self is relationally defined and where responsibility extends, encompassing both ancestral heritage and future continuity, far beyond the present generation. The paper thus aims to reconstruct an African conception of flourishing that is not exhausted by individual success or subjective satisfaction, but that which is measured by one's harmonious existence with the community, acknowledgement of ancestral existence, fidelity to moral traditions and alignment with a transcendent moral order.

The methodological approach adopted in this study is primarily philosophical and interpretive, leaning on phenomenology, comparative philosophy and textual analysis of key African thinkers. In line with this, Phenomenology provides the conceptual tools required for analyzing ritual as a lived experience rather than a detached object of observation. By focusing on how rituals are experienced by participants, their affective dimensions, symbolic depth and embodied practices, the study examines how meaning emerges within ritual spaces as something disclosed instead of merely imposed.

Complementing this by a way of comparative engagement with African philosophical texts and oral traditions, the works of some notable scholars like John S. Mbiti, Kwame Gyekye, Ifeanyi Menkiti and Placide Tempels offer much needed insights into some metaphysical African worldviews. Their reflections on community life, personhood, rituals and spirituality, form underlying foundation for a deeper understanding of true African thought system. Moreover, this study acknowledges that these sources are not consistent or stereotyped, considering the diverse nature of African traditions, rather it identifies shared conceptual models which subscribes and foster a broadly relational and spiritually grounded conception of the good life.

Firstly, this analysis proceeds by positioning ritual within the wider African cosmological framework, in which reality is conceived as a continuum, connecting the divine, the ancestors, the living as well as the nature. Within this context, existence is not divided into separate secular and sacred domains, but rather experienced within an integrated moral and spiritual field. It is also within this field that ritual practices become moments of intensified participation, where ordinary phenomena such as time and space, become symbolically transformed into sites of encounter with deeper realms of reality. In the course of this transformation, those who participate in it, enact and embody moral values rather than merely representing them. Consequently, ethical norms are internalized as lived dispositions rather than as abstract rules.

The study argues that the African understanding of the good life is dynamic and developmental rather than static. Human flourishing is viewed as a continuous journey shaped by moral formation, communal participation, and spiritual growth. Within this framework, rituals play an important role. Initiation rites, for example, do more than mark biological or social change; they represent moral awakening and redefine an individual's responsibilities within the community. Similarly, reconciliation and healing rituals restore moral balance, strengthen social bonds, and reconnect the community with its deeper moral foundations. Consequently, the good life is experienced primarily within a communal context, where personal wellbeing is inseparable from the moral health of the community and the continuity of its traditions.

The study also explores how personhood emerges through ritual participation. Drawing from African communitarian philosophy, it maintains that personhood is not an inherent, isolated attribute but an achievement realized through ethical relationships and communal recognition. Rituals serve as public confirmations of moral commitment and social identity, situating individuals within networks of responsibility that extend across generations. This perspective contrasts with dominant modern moral and political theories that emphasize individual autonomy as the basis of personhood. By presenting this alternative, the study contributes to broader philosophical debates about whether liberal notions of autonomy adequately capture diverse cultural understandings of human flourishing.

Finally, the analysis highlights the role of transcendence in African moral thought. Unlike many Western philosophical approaches that treat transcendence mainly in theological or abstract metaphysical terms, African traditions often experience it as present within everyday life through ritual practices. Ancestors, for instance, are regarded not as distant metaphysical beings but as active moral agents involved in communal decisions, ceremonies, and conflict resolution. Rituals therefore function as bridges between the empirical world and the transcendent realm, guiding communities to situate their moral choices within a broader cosmic narrative that maintains harmony between the past, present, and future.

So far, the findings of this study, suggests that African ritual practices present a philosophically rich alternative to reductive accounts of well-being that is predominant in contemporary discourse. By remodeling ritual as a form of moral phenomenology, the study suggests that meaning, value and purpose are not just subjective constructs, but are disclosed through experiential and participatory engagement with a shared moral world. This goes on to challenge secular humanist models that subjugates spiritual dimensions of life and purely instrumental approaches to development that prioritize economic growth over moral and communal integrity.

As a way of contributing to knowledge, the study promotes African philosophy by providing a systematic account of how ritual functions as a source of moral and ontological insight rather than as a cultural artifact. It closes the gap between phenomenological philosophy and African studies, showcasing how experiential analysis can enlighten the deeper structures of African moral thought. Furthermore, it contributes to comparative ethics by presenting a relational and transcendent pattern of the good life, one that can engage positively with global debates on human flourishing, sustainability as well as intercultural understanding.

The broader implications of this study go beyond philosophy to endeavors like development studies, public policy and intercultural dialogue.

By focusing on the moral and spiritual dimensions of well-being, the study contends that policies directed towards improving quality of life within African contexts, must seriously take into account, the cultural and ritual frameworks through which communities interpret meaning and value. Neglecting these dimensions, stands the risk of imposing external models of development that fail to tally with local understanding of what it means to live well.

In conclusion, the crux of this study, lies in reconstructing the African conception of the good life as a dynamic, relational and transcendent ideal, grounded in ritual participation and communal moral setting. Through a phenomenological and comparative philosophical approach, it explains ritual as a powerful medium of world-disclosure, ethical education and spiritual continuity. By articulating this vision, the study not only deepens our understanding of African philosophical traditions but also calls for a rethinking of dominant global models of human flourishing, stressing the need for frameworks of the good life that acknowledge community, moral responsibility and transcendent meaning as fundamental aspects of a true human nature.



## Spiritual Yearning: The African Dilemma in Christian Religious Practice

This paper explores the apparent contradiction in Christianity's branding of African Traditional Religion (ATR) worship/practice as heathenism, even as many of its adherents conveniently incorporate elements of ATR practice in their Christian practice.

Many Africans believe and profess the Christian faith but have reason(s) to think that their spiritual welfare cannot be adequately met by Christianity. Two categories of syncretistic adherents can be identified: (1) the category of acclaimed Christian Pastors and/or Evangelists who incorporate traditional African magical practice, a core element of ATR, to boost their spiritual powers, and (2) the category of adherents who publicly profess Christianity but secretly practice ATR. Yet, ATR worship is branded heathenish by Christians. This raises the questions of whether actually ATR is a heathenous religion; and whether the adherents of Christianity are also heathens in the strict sense of it.

I raise the question of why African Christian adherents, despite their profession of the Christian faith, find it reasonable and convenient to incorporate ATR into their Christian practice. I assert that the syncretistic phenomenon can be accounted for by the existence of a spiritual gap that must be filled. The gap ignites a yearning that the syncretistic Christian adherents believe cannot, or is difficult to, be filled as long as they remain purely Christians. I argue that Christianity-ATR syncretism can be explained by the nature of the African who is not at home with a foreign religion that promises absolute transcendence.

# Why Memory Cannot Ground Meaning: Botho and the Metaphysics of Human Significance

This paper challenges Aribiah Attoe's Afro nihilist claim that human life becomes meaningless with the irreversible loss of subjective consciousness. I argue that this conclusion rests on a mistaken metaphysical identification of personal worth with memory dependent subjectivity. By reconstructing Attoe's argument, the paper shows that his critique relies on a conflation of epistemic practices of remembrance and recognition with the metaphysical grounding of personhood, thereby treating memory as constitutive of meaning rather than as a mode of evaluative access to value. Against this conflation, I develop an alternative relational ontology grounded in the Setswana conception of Botho, according to which persons are immaterial moral beings whose value persists within a spiritually ordered community independently of being remembered by the living. The paper thus demonstrates that Afro-nihilism can be rejected on metaphysical grounds without appeal to ancestor veneration or belief in an afterlife, and offers African philosophy a non reductionist account of enduring meaning that preserves moral value beyond consciousness and memory.

**Keywords:** Botho, Setswana metaphysics, Afro-nihilism, meaning in life, personhood, subjectivity, memory.

## **Getting Around Calabar**

Uber and Bolt operate in Calabar and are generally the easiest way to get around independently. Public minibuses and shared taxis are also available, though they are easier to use if you are familiar with the city.

## **Food**

The Metropolitan Hotel, our conference hotel, has an on-site restaurant that will be easily accessible throughout your stay. If you would like to explore other options in the city, you may wish to consider:

- Chef Zhanga Foods
- E3 Restaurants
- TummyTreat Restaurant
- Mosby Restaurant

Please make sure to communicate any allergies or dietary requirements.

## **Tours and Places of Interest**

We hope to organise a short tour of Calabar, subject to the conference schedule. If confirmed, further details will be shared during the conference.

Places of interest in and around Calabar include:

- The Calabar Museum
- The Marina Slave Museum
- The Drill Ranch Monkey Sanctuary
- Hope Waddell Training Institution
- Duke Town Church
- The World War 1 Cenotaph/Millennium Park
- The Cross River National Park, etc.

If you wish to visit some of these places on your own account, please be sure to confirm availability and opening times.

