INTRODUCTION:
AFRICA, THE NEW AFRICAN DIASPORA, AND RELIGIOUS TRANSNATIONALISM IN A GLOBAL WORLD

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The common American phrase “all politics are local” could just as easily be applied to religion. Religion does not live in the world as a vague abstraction. It lives through specific people, in specific organizations, and in specific communities. Whenever we look for religion, we find it in churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, prayer meetings, pilgrimages, or in the solitude of individual holy practice. We find it in the ways that people in such places interact with one another, carry out their religious duties, and envision a universe that makes those duties meaningful. And we find it outside such settings, as these people carry their religious visions, ideals, and practices into the public sphere—where, indeed, they often use religion to fight with one another about the meaning of life, about ethics, and about public policy.

This makes the sociology of religion important. Sociology shows us the daily patterns on which religions draw and focuses on actual people as they make their way in the world. It helps us see how religions operate in specific historical moments, whether at the individual, the communal or the societal level. Lately, it reminds us to examine what is happening to religion in a globalizing world.

What do we mean by “globalizing”? Laying aside the various nuances of differing sociological theorists’ understandings of that term, we simply mean that the contemporary world is interconnected as it has never been before. Swift, cheap air travel, multiple modes of communication, and the growth of a worldwide economic market have created ties between people who previously had few points of attachment. These can be as benign as having a Libyan neighbor married to a Texan, putting on a party for Anglophone neighbors that features Mexican food and dances. They can be as dire as an interconnected financial collapse, in which a crisis in one part of the world creates chaos in another. The point is that the world is now a transnational field, in which religion operates alongside other social institutions and forces. Religion’s “locality” thus crosses borders in new and complex ways.
This book explores such transnational localism for one particular set of religions—those that are based in, or connected to, sub-Saharan Africa. In this introduction, we will provide an overview of religions in this sub-continent, particularly the various Christianities about which most of our contributors write, the Pentecostal/charismatic churches and African Independent or Indigenous Churches (AICs),\(^1\) and dimensions of neo-traditional African religions. Then we will review several models of religious transnationalism, each of which focuses on a particular aspect of religions’ cross-border activities—both in Africa and elsewhere. Together, these sections will set the context for our contributors’ chapters, which we will summarize at the end of our introduction.

Religion in Africa: A Very Brief Overview

The African continent is extremely complex—historically, culturally, religiously, socially, and linguistically. It is home to many indigenous religions that, despite their diversity, share common affinities in their core ideas, rituals, and worldviews (Adogame 2007c: 529, 2009: 77). It has also long been influenced by outside religions—particularly Islam and Christianity, but also other Eastern and Western-related spiritualities. These introduced new religious ideas and practices, which caused the abandonment of some indigenous beliefs and rituals and the transformation or reinvention of others. Islam and Christianity also changed as they adjusted to the African context. Finally, such interreligious contact, plus the massive social changes brought about by colonialism, produced several new religions, some of which appropriated indigenous symbols and gave them a new twist (cf. Adogame 2007c: 525–547, 2009: 75–100).

Africa is thus not merely a passive recipient of global pressures. It is also a site of religious creativity that has had considerable effect on the outside world. The growth and global influence of each of the three religious heritages of sub-Saharan Africa—indigenous religions, Christianity and Islam—needs to be understood against the backdrop of mutual influence and exchange at various historical epochs.

\(^1\) Both terms share the acronym, as do two other terms for the same religious groups: “African Initiated Churches” and “African Instituted Churches.” Researchers typically use whichever term emphasizes their main point of interest.