CHAPTER TWELVE

TRANSNATIONAL TRADITION: THE GLOBAL DYNAMICS OF “AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION”

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In 1982, a former Roman Catholic priest in Ghana named Kwabena Damuah held a press conference in Accra to announce the founding of the Afrikania Mission—a religious organization dedicated to reviving and reforming Afrikan Traditional Religion (ATR) as a source of inspiration and emancipation for Africans in Africa and the African Diaspora.¹ According to Afrikania’s founding story, the need for such an organization had first occurred to Damuah while he was attending a World Religions Conference as the Ghanaian representative for the Catholic Church.² There, he was struck by the fact that each of the world’s regions had sent representatives for its own religion—Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism—but all the African attendees represented Christianity or Islam. Nobody represented African indigenous religions. The idea of forming the Afrikania Mission to represent Afrikan Traditional Religion as a “world religion” was born.

The Afrikania Mission is a religious organization in Africa that is strongly transnational in its origins, ideologies, forms, and ambitions. Just as at the conference, however, African traditional religions hardly figure in the literature on religious transnationalism. African Christianity, and especially charismatic Pentecostalism, forcefully present themselves as exemplars of African religion going global, aided by

¹ Afrikania often spells Afrikan Traditional Religion with “k” as a protest against being misrepresented by outsiders’ terms and as a claim to the right of self-representation. The phrase is capitalized, as are other world religions. In this chapter I will use the spelling “Afrikan Traditional Religion” to refer to Afrikania’s reformulation of the various indigenous religious traditions in Africa, and “African traditional religion” to refer to other parties—including academics’—understanding of it.
² The World Religions Conference is a multifaith conference initiated by the worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama‘at over a century ago and regularly organized throughout many countries of the world. It is not known in which year and country Damuah attended the conference.
their strong global and diasporic presence and their widely publicized transnational connections. When it comes to African indigenous religions, most scholarly attention to transnationalism goes to the transatlantic movement of, for example, Yoruba religion (Clarke 2004), Vodun, or Maami Wata spirits (Drewal 2008). A growing number of scholars have explored the transnational histories and transformations of New World African religions, such as Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda, Cuban Santería, and Haitian Vodou, which emerged out of transnational dialogues involving African, New World, and European actors (Matory 2005, Clarke 1998). However, the transnational dimensions of traditional religion in Africa itself, and especially the transnational dynamics of its revival by groups such as the Afrikania Mission, have received much less attention.

This neglect stems from the pervasive framing of African traditional religion as a local phenomenon, in opposition to the global field on which other religions recognizably play. A distinction is often made between “indigenous” or “community religions” and “transnational” or “world religions” (Platvoet 1993, cf. Cox 2007). Indigenous religions are seen as particular to a single society and as strongly localized; world religions, such as Christianity, have spread across geographical space and are seen as transnational or global. This distinction, however, has a history that is itself thoroughly global and carries a political load, which has far-reaching consequences for contemporary formulations of atr. Taking as an ethnographic case study the Ghanaian Afrikania Mission’s representation of traditional African religion as a world religion of the same stature as Christianity or Islam, this chapter argues against treating neo-traditional African religion and new African Christianity as mutually opposed and distinct religious phenomena. Instead, it proposes to see them as part of one religious field with a shared and strongly transnational history, in which they influence each other and define themselves vis-à-vis each other. While the point is by now well established that African Christianity, as part of a global religion, cannot be studied without reference to the local religious contexts in which it manifests, the point to be made here is that African traditional religion should equally be studied as part of the historical globalization of religion. This globalization involves both the global spread of world religions such as Christianity and the globalization of the concept of religion itself. This chapter shows that neo-traditional African religion is inextricably linked with both.