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The Frenemy of African Traditional Religion and African Indigenous Christianity

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Abstract

The interaction between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African Indigenous Christianity (AIC) has fostered a complex relationship marked by continuity and conflict. While African Indigenous Christianity emerged in part to contextualise Christianity within African cultural and religious frameworks, it has also positioned itself in opposition to ATR. This paradoxical relationship can best be described as that of "frenemy," characterised by rivalry, selective borrowing, and mutual influence. This paper examines the nature of this relationship and its effects on ATR, AIC, African culture, and social stability in African societies. What are the consequences of this frenemy dynamic for Christianity in Africa? What impacts does it have on African religion? How has this interaction transformed African culture, and what potential future outcomes might it produce? Lastly, how has this religious relationship shaped social harmony within African communities? Using a qualitative and analytical approach, the study analyses historical, theological, and sociological literature to explore how AICs have both inherited and challenged ATR worldviews. The research relies on two complementary frameworks: Religious Syncretism Theory and Frenemy Theory, which together elucidate the ambivalent relationship between African Indigenous Christianity and African Traditional Religion as one involving appropriation, rejection, and theological debate.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, African Indigenous Christianity, Frenemy, Syncretism, African Culture

Introduction

Before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, African Traditional Religion (ATR) was the primary framework through which Africans interpreted reality, engaged with the sacred, and organised communal life. ATR was not merely a system of beliefs but a lived religion rooted in culture, expressed through rituals, sacred spaces, symbols, and communal practices that shaped every stage of life[2]. The introduction of Christianity to Africa, particularly through Western missionary efforts, significantly altered the continent's religious landscape. Missionary Christianity often regarded ATR as primitive, pagan, or

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[2]M. Nokwanda and R. Bhagwan, "A Journey into African Spirituality: An Exploration of Its Key Values, Traditions, and Healing Methodologies," *Religions* 16, no. 10 (2025): 1300.
J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1969), 2–3, 15

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demonic, leading to the systematic belittling of African religious heritage[3]. In response to this cultural and theological alienation, African Indigenous Christianity (AIC) emerged as a distinct religious movement seeking to reinterpret Christianity within African cultural frameworks and spiritual sensibilities[4]. Despite sharing cultural roots, the relationship between ATR and AIC has remained deeply ambivalent. On one hand, AICs draw heavily on African cosmology, symbolism, healing traditions, and communal religious expressions rooted in ATR, while on the other hand, many AICs explicitly reject ATR practices, deeming them incompatible with Christian faith and actively discouraging participation in traditional rituals, ancestor veneration, and the use of charms or sacred spaces[5]. This dual stance of appropriation and rejection creates a paradoxical relationship that cannot be easily classified as either harmonious coexistence or complete opposition.

This article conceptualises the ATR-AIC relationship as that of frenemy, characterised by rivalry, competition, and antagonism, yet sustained by shared cultural foundations and overlapping religious expressions. The problem addressed in this study is the tendency in contemporary scholarship to over-emphasise the friendliness or complementarity between ATR and AIC, thereby underplaying the persistent hostility and cultural loss embedded in their interaction. It challenges romanticised interpretations of religious hybridity and argues for a more critical assessment of how power, identity, and cultural survival are negotiated within Africa's evolving religious landscape. This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research methodology, relying exclusively on secondary sources, specifically peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and academic conference papers relevant to African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African Indigenous Christianity (AIC). This methodology is informed by the subject's conceptual and historical nature, which requires critical engagement with existing scholarly interpretations rather than empirical fieldwork.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary frameworks: Religious Syncretism Theory, developed by Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, and Frenemy Theory. Together, these theories provide a robust analytical lens for interpreting the complex and paradoxical relationship between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African Indigenous Christianity (AIC).

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[3]T. Shoko, "Christianity and Traditional African Religions," in *Anthology of African Christianity*, ed. I. Phiri et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2016), 89.
S. Odeyemi, "In Ancient Times, God Spoke in Different Ways to Our Ancestors and through the Prophets: Existential and Ontological Possible Parallels between Yoruba Traditional Religion and the Christ Event," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 54, no. 4 (2019): 520-538.

[4]E. Afriyie, "A Christian Expression of African Spirituality: The Case Study of Three African Initiated Churches in Ghana,"*E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 9, no. 6 (2023):221-237, h**ttp://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2023963**

[5]M.Murove, "A Symbiotic Relationship between African Spirituality and Ethics," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Ethics*, ed. MunyaradziMurove (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 53, 62.
E. Afriyie, "A Christian Expression of African Spirituality," 2251-237

Religious Syncretism Theory- A Critical Approach: This study adopts a critical, tension-based approach to syncretism, rather than viewing it as a harmonious or straightforward blending of religious traditions. Critical syncretism, as outlined by Stewart and Shaw, highlights contestation, power imbalances, selective appropriation, and theological tensions within processes of religious interaction. It offers a useful analytical perspective on this relationship because it recognises that religious borrowing does not necessarily imply mutual acceptance[6]. In the case of ATR and AICs, elements of ATR are often reinterpreted, renamed, or absorbed into Christian frameworks, while the original religious system is delegitimised or marginalised. Sacred places, ritual objects, and spiritual mediators associated with ATR are condemned, even as their functional equivalents reappear within AIC worship and practice. This selective appropriation reflects not synthesis but competitive coexistence, in which similarity exists alongside hostility. Stewart[7] and Shaw further explain that this tension-based syncretism helps account for the unequal power relations that shape religious interactions. AICs, though indigenous, often inherit missionary discourses that portray ATR as primitive, demonic, or outdated. Consequently, ATR is marginalised in public religious life, surviving through adaptation, secrecy, and symbolic reinterpretation rather than open practice. In this context, syncretism becomes a strategy for survival rather than a display of mutual respect[8].

Frenemy Theory: The term "frenemy" originates in social psychology and is increasingly used to describe intergroup relationships marked by cooperation, rivalry, and resentment[9]. A frenemy relationship arises when parties act both friendly and hostile, remaining interconnected while competing for legitimacy and influence[10]. In intergroup relations theory, frenemy dynamics are characterised by several key features: (1) ambivalence, in which positive and negative feelings coexist; (2) interdependence, in which parties cannot fully separate despite conflicts; (3) competitive cooperation, in which collaboration occurs alongside underlying rivalry; and (4) boundary maintenance, in which groups differentiate themselves while sharing common resources[11]. Applying Frenemy Theory to ATR–AIC relations highlights several dynamics: First, ambivalence is evident in how AICs draw on ATR's spiritual framework yet condemn and criticise the original religion[12]. Second, interdependence appears in the shared cultural worldview that neither party can fully escape[13]. Third,

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[6]Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, eds., *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–10, 21

[7]Stewart and Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, 6-9.

[8]L. Abiona and O. Abioje, "The Challenges Facing African Traditional Religion as a Minority Religion in Nupeland, Kwara State, Nigeria," *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1–18.

[9]Nancy Whittier, *Frenemies: Feminists, Conservatives, and Sexual Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–15.

[10]Whittier, *Frenemies*, 1–15.

[11]Whittier, *Frenemies*, 1-15.

A.Iheanacho, "African Traditional Religion in a World of Change," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 1, no. 4 (2018): 25–26.

[12]J. Mokhutso, "The Intersections and Complexities of African Traditional Religion and Christianity: An Inquiry through the African Philosophy of Community," *Religions* 17, no. 5 (2026): 621.

[13]Mokhutso, "Intersections and Complexities," 625.

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competitive cooperation is evident in how AICs offer similar spiritual services—such as healing, protection, and mediation—while claiming exclusive Christian legitimacy[14]. Fourth, boundary maintenance explains why AICs must publicly reject ATR even while privately adopting its logic.[15]

African Traditional Religion (ATR) and its Core Elements and Values

African Traditional Religion (ATR) encompasses the indigenous beliefs and practices that originated and developed within African societies before the arrival of foreign religions. ATR is deeply rooted in African culture and is transmitted primarily through oral tradition, ritual practice, and community participation rather than written scriptures. It is holistic, integrating religion, morality, social life, politics, and cosmology into a single worldview. A key feature of ATR is its communal focus. In African societies, religious identity is not merely a personal choice but is passed down through active participation in community life. ATR does not draw a line between the sacred and the secular; instead, it views all aspects of life as spiritually connected. This inclusive approach sets ATR apart from many forms of Western religious thought.

ATR affirms belief in a Supreme Being regarded as the ultimate source of life, power, and moral authority. Although the Supreme Being is often perceived as transcendent and less directly involved in daily affairs, this deity remains central to African cosmology[16]. Names and attributes of the Supreme Being vary across cultures, yet belief in a supreme divine reality is a shared feature of ATR[17]. Divinities and spirits act as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and humanity. These spiritual beings are linked to natural forces, specific locations, or social roles, and are actively engaged in community affairs. Their veneration reflects the African view of a universe filled with spirits, where visible and invisible realities coexist. Ancestors occupy a central place in ATR as the living-dead who maintain an ongoing relationship with their descendants. They serve as moral guardians, protectors, and mediators between the spiritual and human realms[18]. Ancestral veneration reinforces social ethics, respect for tradition, and communal continuity[19]. Sacred places such as groves, rivers, shrines, and ancestral homes are integral to ATR practice. These spaces are believed to host a spiritual presence and are treated with reverence[20]. Sacred objects---including ritual staffs, stones, masks, and charms---serve as tangible expressions of spiritual power, authority, and religious identity[21]. Rituals in

[14]Afriyie, "A Christian Expression of African Spirituality," 221–237.
[15]A. Robb, "Emerging, Emergent, Emergence: Boundary Maintenance, Definition Construction, and Legitimation Strategies in the Establishment of a Post-Evangelical Subculture," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 2 (2017): 398–417.
C. Ele, "African Traditional Religion in Modern Africa," *International Journal of Arts, Languages and Business Studies* 5 (2020): 268-269.
[16]Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 29-31.
[17]Iheanacho, "African Traditional Religion in a World of Change," 25-26.
[18]J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1991), 81-83.
[19]N. Morgan and B. Okyere-Manu, "The Belief in and Veneration of Ancestors in Akan Traditional Thought: Finding Values for Human Well-being," *Alternation* 30 (2020): 11-31.
[20] Iheanacho, "African Traditional Religion in a World of Change," 30-31.
[21]Ele, "African Traditional Religion in Modern Africa," 271-272.

ATR mark significant life events such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death. Charms and symbols function as protective or mediatory devices, embodying spiritual power within material forms[22]. These practices are not merely symbolic but are believed to produce spiritual and social effects.

Role of ATR in Shaping African Morality, Social Order, and Worldview

ATR plays a vital role in shaping African moral values and social structures. Moral behaviour is understood in ATR as obedience to spiritual and communal norms, with wrongdoing seen as a disruption of cosmic balance[23]. Social institutions such as family, chieftaincy, and justice systems are religiously endorsed, reinforcing cohesion, truthfulness, human integrity, and responsibility. The African worldview shaped by ATR highlights the interconnectedness of humans, nature, ancestors, and the divine. This worldview encourages communal responsibility, respect for elders, and reverence for life[24]. As observed, ATR is best understood as a lived religion, expressed through daily practices rather than formal doctrines. Religious knowledge is enacted through participation in festivals, rituals, storytelling, and moral instruction within the community. Its survival has historically depended on communal transmission rather than institutional structures. Although ATR has faced significant challenges due to the expansion of Christianity and Islam, it continues to persist in modified forms, sometimes openly, sometimes covertly. This persistence highlights its deep cultural roots and ongoing relevance to the African worldview and identity.

African Indigenous Christianity (AIC)

African Indigenous Christianity (AIC) denotes Christian movements that originated in Africa and are founded, led, and shaped by Africans, largely independent of Western missionary control. These churches emerged prominently in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to cultural alienation, racial discrimination, and the theological rigidity of missionary Christianity[25]. AICs sought to express Christian faith in ways that resonated with African cultural experiences and spiritual sensibilities. Unlike mission-founded churches, AICs emphasise African leadership, indigenous forms of worship, and contextual theology. They arose not as a rejection of Christianity but as a reinterpretation of it within African cosmological

[22]Benjamin Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 56-58.
[23]A. Agada, "Between KwasiWiredu's Humanistic Ethics and MotsamaiMolefe'sSupernaturalist Ethics," *Philosophia,* A Global Journal of Philosophy, Springer, 51, no. 4 (2023): 2285–2299.
[24]T. Yerokun and A. Oni, "African Traditional Religion and Christianity: Ethical and Religious Values in Dialogue," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 9, no. 8 (2025): 6458–6465
[25] D. Ayegboyin and S. Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective* (Lagos: Greater Heights Publications, 1997), 18–22.
S. Masondo, "The History of African Indigenous Churches in Scholarship," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 18, no. 2 (2005): 89--103.

frameworks[26]. Consequently, AICs became vehicles for reclaiming African agency in religious expression.

A defining feature of AICs is their strong focus on spiritual power and experiential religion. Healing, prophecy, deliverance, and visions play central roles in worship and religious practice. These emphases reflect African views of spirituality as dynamic and interventionist, addressing daily concerns such as illness, misfortune, and social instability. AICs also emphasise communal worship through music, dance, and symbolic rituals that reflect African cultural expressions. Leadership within AICs often mirrors traditional authority systems, with prophets, elders, and spiritual leaders assuming roles similar to those of traditional priests or custodians of sacred knowledge, who are accorded a higher level of reverence. Theologically, AICs uphold core Christian doctrines while interpreting them through African cultural categories. Christ is frequently depicted as healer, protector, and victorious over evil forces, resonating strongly with African cosmological concerns.[27]

African Indigenous Christianity and Cultural Relevance

African Indigenous Christianity has gained widespread acceptance largely because of its cultural relevance. By integrating African languages, music, symbols, and social values, AICs have made Christianity accessible to African communities in ways that mission churches have often struggled to achieve. This contextual engagement has enabled AICs to thrive in both rural and urban areas. However, this cultural rootedness has sparked ongoing debates about theological authenticity and syncretism. While AICs assert that they contextualise Christianity, critics contend that they blur the line between Christian faith and African traditional spirituality. This tension underpins the complex relationship between AICs and ATR.

Existing Relationship between African Indigenous Christianity, African Culture, and African Traditional Religion

The relationship between African Indigenous Christianity, African culture, and African Traditional Religion is best understood as one of selective engagement rather than outright acceptance or rejection. AICs operate within African cultural contexts historically shaped by ATR, and this environment continues to shape their worldview, symbols, and religious expectations. African culture provides the conceptual framework through which AICs interpret Christian theology. Concepts of spiritual causality, communal identity, and ritual efficacy—deeply rooted in ATR—continue to shape how Christianity is understood and practised[28].

[26] E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 42–45..
[27]P. Musoni, "Re-visiting Christology from an Indigenous Perspective: New Images of Jesus in African Christianity in the Zimbabwean Context," in *The Bible and Sociological Contours: Some African Perspectives*, ed. Z. Dube, L. Maseno, and E. Mligo (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 34–36
[28]E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed*, 51-54.

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There are notable continuities between AICs and Traditional Religion, especially in worldview and religious practice. Both traditions believe in a spiritually active universe in which supernatural forces interact with human affairs. The research observes that healing, prophetic utterances, and the use of symbolic objects within AICs often resemble traditional religious practices, though they are reinterpreted within a Christian framework. Ayegboyin and Ishola explain that AICs, like Traditional Religion, emphasise the good things of life that Africans appreciate. These include good health, long life, children, wealth, titles and honours, and recognition of these has helped AICs maintain a strong hold on their members. They believe that these good things of life can be obtained and maintained not only physically but also spiritually[29].

For instance, William Wade Harris (1860–1929), a Liberian prophet, led a mass evangelistic campaign across the Ivory Coast and Ghana in 1913–1914. Harris baptised thousands of Ivorians and Ghanaians during this period[30]. Importantly, Harris did not criticise the use of traditional herbs for healing, but opposed the traditional rites performed over them. He therefore preached that people should pray over the herbs instead of performing the rites. He believed that a spiritual force underlies every misfortune or ill health and must be addressed through prayer[31]. The great prophet and evangelist of the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Joseph Ayo Babalola (1904–1959), further exemplified this spiritual dynamism. He was a great miracle worker. His movement embodied a pragmatic approach to Christian life through prayer and spiritual practices that resonated with African spiritual sensibilities from the 1930s until his death. Babalola continued his healing and revivalist activities within the newly formed CAC, where he attracted mass followings through his prophetic and healing ministry[32].

Meanwhile, as noted by the research, this orientation was also transferred to African Indigenous neo-Pentecostal churches, such as The Redeemed Christian Church of God under the leadership of Enoch Adeboye, and Mountain of Fire and Miracles, founded by Daniel Olukoya, both in Nigeria. It also extended to Prophet Blessing[33], the leader of the Grace World Church congregation in Harare, Zimbabwe, and to Prophet David Owuor, an evangelical and healing preacher in Nakuru, Kenya, in the early 2000s[34], as well as to Fire Oja of Zion Prayer Ministry, a prophet who specialises in precocious preaching and prayers for youth empowerment in Accra, Ghana[35].

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[29]Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, 152

[30]N. C. Brockman, "Harris William Wade (B)," *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, accessed August 7, 2026, https://dacb.org/stories/nigeria/braide1-garrick/

[31]Brockman, "Harris William Wade (B)." Dictionary of African Christian Biography

[32]Brockman, "Babalola, Joseph Ayodele (D)."
S. Fatokun, "Babalola, Joseph Ayodele (Apostle) (1904–1959)," in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilisation*, ed. George Thomas Kurian (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), http://doi.org/10.1002/9780470670606.wbecc0107

[33]T. Mazuruse, "Prophet Blessing's Mission of Hope," *Newsday*, June 21, 2026, https://www.newsday.co.zw

[34]*The Star*, "Prophet Owuor's Rise to Prominence" 2025, https://www.the-star.co.ke/counties/rift-valley/2025-01-03-prophet-owuors-rise-to-prominence

[35]*Vanguard News,* "Prophet Fire Oja's 20-Year Journey of Faith", 2025, https://www.bing.com/search?q=Vanguard.++"Prophet+Fire+Oja%27s+20-

Moreover, the communal focus of AIC worship reflects the community-oriented nature of ATR, where religious participation strengthens social bonds and collective identity. Oshitelu explains that, like members of the Traditional faith, AICs usually foster a stronger fraternal bond, which has helped social integration[36]. He observes that they find it easy to call one another brothers and sisters, even without a blood tie. AICs usually make their members feel that they are not alone in their predicament; they emphasise respect for elders and the fulfilment of necessary obligations towards family members[37].

Similar to the concept of brotherhood is the use of Patron and Matron. They believe that choosing an elderly man or woman to mother and father a society in the church is part of their communal solidarity[38]. Akinnawo confirms that in Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) women are ranked as: Mother-In Israel, Senior Mother-In Israel, Most Senior Mother-In Israel, Apostolic Mother, Senior Apostolic Mother, Rev. Apostolic Mother, Senior Rev. Apostolic Mother, Iya Ewe, Matron for the children society, while in the Celestial Church of Christ women are also given the post of Mother in Celestial/Israel, *IyaAkorin* – Choir Matron, and *Iya Ewe,* as in the C&S[39]. AICs recognise the posts of Church Matrons and Church Patrons to allow people to display cogent parental roles and support; these roles go beyond the spiritual to the communal.

Oshitelu stressed that wearing uniform Prayer Gowns or Soutanes is akin to wearing what Yoruba tradition terms *Aso-Ebi. Aso-Ebi* is a type of uniform cloth worn by a group of people to show solidarity, joint sympathy, and mutual obligations, and to demonstrate communal *Esprit de Corps*[40]. Prayer Gowns level the status gaps among the AICs and ensure no one feels inferior or superior during the worship service. This has served as a form of communal control, which is also common in African culture.

Despite these similarities, this research found that AICs take a stand of theological opposition to ATR. Many AICs explicitly reject ancestral veneration, traditional rituals, and the use of charms, claiming they are incompatible with Christian faith. This rejection often extends to physical spaces such as shrines and sacred groves, which are sometimes abandoned or destroyed after conversion to Christianity. For example, William Wade Harris, the Liberian prophet, taught strict opposition to many traditional religious practices, calling people to live pure and to reject pagan religion. His message was simple: burn fetishes and be baptised[41]. Garrick Braide successfully persuaded new converts

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Year+Journey+of+Faith&form=ANNTH1&refig=6a768481567a4d9baf55be1e4260fd77&pc=HCTS

[36]G. Oshitelu, *History of Aladura Independent Churches 1918-1940: An Interpretation* (Ibadan: Hope Publication, 2007), 120–122.

[37]Oshitelu, History of Aladura Independent Churches, 120-122.

[38]Y.Akinnawo, "Women and Christianity in Southwestern Nigeria From 19th to Mid-20th Century: Implication for Contemporary Churches in Nigeria," *Philosophical Alternatives* 33, no. 2 (2024): 53-66

[39]Akinnawo, "Women and Christianity in Southwestern Nigeria," 53-66

[40]Oshitelu, History of Aladura Independent Churches, 120-122

[41]E. Ischei, "A Soul of Fire: William Wade Harris," *Christian History Magazine* 22, no. 3 (2003): 1.

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to reject and destroy their fetishes and traditional religious objects, yet his ministry simultaneously drew upon indigenous metaphysical concepts such as vital force, ancestral agency, and spiritual causality.[42]As Abisola reports, Prophet Fire Oja of Accra, Ghana, usually makes pronouncements that engage with spiritual causality, a concept rooted in the ATR worldview, while operating within a Christian framework that explicitly rejects traditional religious practices[43]. As noted, one of the slogans of Mountain of Fire and Miracle by Dr Daniel Olukoya is 'Die by Fire.' This slogan is often included in prayers to attack the use of charms, incantations, and occultism, which are believed to hinder the success of members of the church. This hostility reflects the lasting influence of missionary theology, which depicted ATR as idolatrous and spiritually dangerous. Consequently, AICs exist in a state of tension—drawing on ATR cultural resources while actively opposing ATR as a religious system. Most of the warfare prayers and songs in AICs are directed towards many of the core elements and values of ATR.

African Indigenous Christianity serves as both a mediator and a competitor within Africa's religious landscape. It mediates Christianity to African culture by indigenising worship and theology. At the same time, it competes directly with ATR for spiritual authority, legitimacy, and community loyalty. This dual role has heightened religious rivalry in African societies, with AICs seeking to supplant ATR as the main source of spiritual meaning while preserving its cultural appeal. As a result, the relationship between AIC and ATR is neither neutral nor complementary but characterised by rivalry and selective appropriation. This dynamic has established their relationship as one of frenemies rather than true partners.

The Frenemy of African Traditional Religion and African Indigenous Christianity

Frenemies of ATR and AICs are discussed from these 4 points of view:
1. Areas of Divergence and Conflict: One of the most obvious signs of hostility in the ATR - AIC relationship is the condemnation of ATR practices as idolatrous or demonic. Many AICs explicitly ban ancestral veneration, divination, traditional rituals, and the use of charms, viewing them as incompatible with the Christian faith. This demonisation reflects the enduring influence of missionary theology, which portrayed ATR as a spiritual danger to be eradicated rather than engaged with[44]. Closely related to this condemnation is the destruction or neglect of sacred sites. Shrines, sacred groves, rivers, and ancestral locations, once central to African religious life, have increasingly been abandoned, de-sacralised, or intentionally destroyed since the adoption of Christianity. These actions represent not only religious change but also the decline of indigenous spiritual authority and cultural memory.

[42]Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, 50-53
[43]AbisolaShojobi, "Fire Oja, Ghana's Fiery Voice of Faith and Prophetic Power," 2025, https://independent.ng/prophet-fire-oja-ghanas-fiery-voice-of-faith-and-prophetic-power/
[44]D. Shungwi and H. Martins, "The Socio-Cultural Impact of Religious Misinterpretation of Mambilla Traditional Religion of Taraba State," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 1 (2025): 151–170.

2. Areas of Resemblance and Borrowing: Despite overt hostility, AICs share strong similarities with ATR in religious practice. Healing remains a central focus in both traditions, addressing illness, misfortune, and spiritual imbalance through prayer, ritual acts, and symbolic mediation. The AIC's emphasis on prophetic healing reflects traditional therapeutic systems rooted in ATR cosmology. Spiritual mediation is another important area of continuity. While AICs reject traditional priests and ancestors, they elevate prophets, apostles, and spiritual leaders who serve as intermediaries between the divine and the community, roles structurally similar to those in ATR[45]. Furthermore, AIC worship incorporates symbolism and ritual forms derived from African culture, including water, sacred objects, rhythmic music, dance, and ritualised space. Although reinterpreted within Christian narratives, these elements demonstrate deep continuity with ATR ritual logic.[46]

3. Mutual Influence without Mutual Acceptance: The ATR-AIC relationship is characterised by mutual influence without mutual acceptance. ATR continues to shape the worldview, spiritual expectations, and symbolic language of AICs, yet ATR itself is not regarded as a legitimate religious system. This selective adaptation enables AICs to remain culturally relevant while preserving a theological distance from traditional religion[47].

4. Competitive Coexistence in African Religious Spaces: ATR and AIC coexist within the same social and cultural spaces, competing for spiritual authority, moral legitimacy, and communal loyalty. As the research observes, this rivalry heightens religious tension, as AICs position themselves as superior to ATR while also drawing on ATR's cultural capital. This dynamic clearly defines their relationship as one of frenemies rather than allies.

Effect of the Frenemy Relationship on African Traditional Religion

One major impact of this frenemy relationship is the gradual erosion of ATR's public authority. ATR has been increasingly marginalised in public discourse, education, and governance, often portrayed as outdated or incompatible with modern religious life. This marginalisation has led to the loss of key elements of ATR. Sacred groves and shrines have been abandoned or destroyed, and certain charms and ritual tools have fallen out of use due to Christian condemnation. Physical symbols of ATR have been systematically devalued or eradicated.

Nevertheless, ATR has persisted through adaptation and secrecy, continuing in covert forms within families and communities. Many ATR concepts, such as spiritual causality and protection, have also been reinterpreted within Christian language and orientations, allowing their survival under new religious

[45] O. Olajide, "Ecstatic Prophets in Israel and Its Relevance to the African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105, no. 5 (2024): 1.–11.

[46] O. Kealotswe, "The Nature and Character of the African Independent Churches (AICs) in the 21st Century: Their Theological and Social Agenda," *StudiaHistoriaeEcclesiasticae* 40, no. 2 (2014): 227.227-242.

[47] P. Mumo, "Continuing Relevance of African Traditional Religion: Case Studies of African Instituted Churches in Kenya," in *African Traditional Religions Revisited: Dynamics in Indigenous Religions in 21st Century Africa; Essays in Honour of Monsignor Professor Joseph ChaphadzikaChakanza*, ed. L. Ndekha et al. (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2024), 91–107.

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identities. Despite marginalisation, ATR remains culturally influential, even when not publicly acknowledged. The frenemy relationship has fractured traditional religious authority structures. Where once priests, elders, and lineage heads exercised integrated spiritual and social authority, AICs now provide alternative sources of religious legitimacy, creating competition and sometimes confusion within communities. This dynamic has significantly led to a redefinition of ATR practices as "culture" rather than "religion." Some AICs permit traditional music, dance, and even certain rituals if they are classified as cultural rather than religious expressions. This semantic shift enables cultural continuity while maintaining religious boundaries, but it also fundamentally redefines the nature of ATR itself.

Effect of the Frenemy Relationship on African Indigenous Christianity

The frenemy relationship has significantly contributed to the growth and expansion of AICs, largely because of their cultural familiarity and spiritual relevance. By engaging with African cosmology, AICs address existential concerns that mission churches ignore—such as sickness, misfortune, infertility, and protection from evil. According to Appiah[48], this cultural embeddedness has made AICs appealing to Africans seeking spiritual solutions within familiar frameworks. However, this borrowing has created internal theological tensions as AICs struggle to reconcile biblical orthodoxy with African spiritual frameworks. Questions about the nature of ancestors, the source of prophetic authority, and the legitimacy of ritual objects fuel ongoing doctrinal debates within AICs. Consequently, mission churches accuse AICs of syncretism[49], thereby challenging their theological legitimacy. Mainline denominations often perceive AICs as insufficiently Christian, too compromised by traditional influences. This external critique pressures AICs to distance themselves further from ATR.

This tension creates an identity struggle as AICs adopt ATR worldview structures while publicly opposing ATR as a religious system. From observations, AIC leaders constantly negotiate boundaries, maintaining cultural relevance while demonstrating Christian authenticity. This boundary work is central to their frenemy stance. Paradoxically, this frenemy relationship has also spurred theological innovation. AICs have developed distinctive Christologies, pneumatologies, and understandings of salvation that address African concerns. The tension between appropriation and rejection has led to inventive theological synthesis.

Effect on African Culture and Possible Future Consequences

Culturally, the frenemy relationship has shaped African religious expression. While some traditions have been maintained through Christian adaptation, others have been entirely lost, eroding indigenous knowledge systems. The

[48]D N.Y.M. Botchway, "Jemisimiham Jehu Appiah: A 10th Century African Prophet's Intellectual Contribution to the Africanisation of the Church in the Gold Coast," *Social Sciences and Missions* 30, no. 3/4 (2017): 298–324.
[49]J. K. Mashabela, "Africa Independent Churches as AmabandlaOmoya and Syncretism in South Africa," *Religions* 14, no. 11 (2023): 1369.

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meanings attached to cultural practices have evolved, even as the forms have remained the same. This interaction has produced a hybrid religious and cultural identity, blending Christian theology with African cosmology. Many Africans move between AIC and ATR frameworks depending on the context, creating complex religious identities that resist simple categorisation[50]. Future outcomes might include a further decline in ATR practices as older generations pass away and younger generations mainly identify with Christianity. Continued hybridity may intensify, leading to increasingly blurred boundaries between Christian and traditional elements. Alternatively, a renewed revival of African traditional consciousness could emerge in response to cultural loss, especially among intellectuals and cultural nationalists. The long-term consequence is a reshaping of African heritage, with cultural memory at risk of being preserved only in fragmented or altered forms. Traditional religious knowledge—about herbs, rituals, cosmology, and ethics—may survive only as long as it can be translated into Christian frameworks.[51]

Influence of the Frenemy on Tranquillity in African Society

While AICs promote moral order and community cohesion, religious competition has also fuelled family and communal conflicts, particularly when conversion disrupts traditional authority structures. Adebayo opines that the contest for spiritual legitimacy has undermined traditional leadership roles. Kings, chiefs, elders, and lineage heads who derive authority from ATR find their influence challenged by AIC prophets and pastors who claim superior spiritual power[52]. This fragmentation of authority can destabilise communities. Additionally, the frenemy dynamic has intensified religious polarisation, dividing communities along competing religious allegiances. This competition sometimes escalates into public disputes over sacred spaces, rituals, and community decision-making. The relationship has produced mixed effects on social cohesion. In some cases, AICs offer moral frameworks and community support that strengthen social stability, while in other cases, religious rivalry over rituals and festivals versus AIC church worship services creates tension and conflict. For instance, the *Egungun (*masquerade) festival can at times clash with an AIC open crusade, or midnight *oro* occult can clash with AIC vigils. Thus, the frenemy relationship has neither ensured peace nor guaranteed conflict but involves a complex negotiation of harmony within African society.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the frenemy relationship between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African Indigenous Christianity (AIC), several recommendations are proposed to address the cultural, religious, and social challenges arising from this dynamic.

[50]J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 181-183.
[51] J. Iheanacho, 'African Traditional Religion in a World of Change', 33-35.
[52]F. Adebayo, "Worldview, Conflicting Spiritualties and Religious Ecology in Nigeria," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 28, no. 2 (2024): 143-166.

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- Prioritise Critical Engagement Over Idealised Friendliness: Scholars, religious leaders, and policymakers should recognise that although ATR and AIC share cultural roots, their relationship remains fundamentally competitive. Overestimating the friendliness between ATR and AICs risks overlooking the ongoing marginalisation of ATR and the potential for cultural loss.

- Proper Documentation and Preservation of ATR Heritage: To prevent further erosion, sacred spaces, ritual objects, charms, and indigenous knowledge should be systematically documented and preserved. Collaboration among cultural institutions, universities, and communities can help safeguard these resources for future generations. This documentation should be carried out respectfully, with community participation and consent.

- Contextualised Religious Education: Religious education programmes in secular institutions should integrate ATR knowledge to promote cultural literacy, tolerance, and appreciation of indigenous heritage. This can help prevent the wholesale demonisation of ATR and encourage informed engagement. Viewing ATR as a coherent religious system rather than mere superstition can help reduce prejudice**d attitudes.**

- Dialogue between ATR Custodians and AIC Leaders: Structured dialogue and interfaith initiatives can provide a platform for addressing misconceptions, reducing hostility, and exploring avenues for cultural coexistence without compromising theological integrity. Such dialogue should recognise both shared heritage and genuine differences.

- Promotion of Social Cohesion in Communities: Because religious competition affects family and community relations, programmes that emphasise communal values, shared cultural history, and conflict resolution can improve social harmony and reduce tensions arising from religious loyalty. Community-based interfaith initiatives can foster connections across religious divides.

- Development of Ethical Guidelines for Religious Competition: Since competition between ATR and AIC is unlikely to end, establishing ethical guidelines for religious rivalry could minimise harm. These guidelines might include respect for sacred spaces, bans on damaging religious property, and standards for interreligious dialogue.

Conclusion

The relationship between African Traditional Religion and African Indigenous Christianity is best understood as a frenemy dynamic, characterised by rivalry, selective borrowing, and cultural interdependence. Drawing on Critical Syncretism and Frenemy Theory, this study shows that AICs have extensively borrowed from ATR in healing practices, spiritual mediation, and ritual symbolism, even as they have condemned, marginalised, and transformed key ATR elements such as sacred sites, charms, and communal rituals. This paradoxical interaction has significantly shaped African religious and cultural life. ATR has gradually lost authority but persists through adaptation and secrecy, maintaining cultural relevance. Meanwhile, AICs have grown through

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cultural familiarity but face theological tensions and accusations of syncretism. The frenemy relationship has also reshaped African cultural identity, creating hybrid forms of religious expression and risking the loss of indigenous knowledge systems. Socially, it has produced mixed effects on community cohesion and peace, fostering spiritual engagement while also causing conflicts over loyalty and authority. Thus, although African Traditional Religion and African Indigenous Christianity are deeply connected, their relationship remains fundamentally antagonistic, with mutual influence occurring without full acceptance. Recognising this complexity is vital for scholars, religious leaders, and policymakers seeking to balance religious development, cultural preservation, and social harmony in contemporary African societies.

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