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From "Primitive Religion" to Cognitive Universal: Decolonizing the Study of African Traditional Religions

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Abstract

The marginalization of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) by Western scholarship and colonial authorities has long undermined their identity and legitimacy. Historically, ATRs have been the foundation of African society, shaping values, principles, worship practices, and philosophical outlooks. With the advent of Westernization through colonialism and imperialism, ATRs were labeled "fetishistic", "primitive", "superstitious", and "inhumane", mischaracterizations that delegitimized indigenous spirituality while promoting Western Christian traditions as superior. This ethnocentric bias alienated Africans from their religious heritage and eroded their cultural identity. Although many ATR practices have parallels in Western religions, one has been privileged over the other to justify cultural domination. This paper employs the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) as a theoretical framework to interrogate these ethnocentric biases. CSR emphasizes universal cognitive mechanisms underlying religious thought, providing a platform to reinterpret ATRs as expressions of shared human cognitive capacities rather than exotic deviations from a normative standard. Through comparative and conceptual analysis methods, the paper argues that indigenous epistemologies, rooted in oral traditions, communal values, and relational ontologies, embody complex cognitive strategies comparable to those of any religion. By dismantling the "primitive" stereotype, this paper situates ATRs within a global discourse that recognizes their philosophical sophistication, cognitive legitimacy, and cultural resilience, thereby advancing a more inclusive and methodologically pluralist study of religion.

Keywords: African Traditional Religions, Cognitive Science of Religion, Decolonization, Ethnocentrism, and Indigenous Epistemology

Introduction

The study of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) has long been shaped by colonial encounters and Western epistemological dominance, resulting in deeply entrenched stereotypes that misrepresent their complexity and philosophical depth (Mogaji, 2025). Historically, ATRs were not only systems of worship but also served as the moral, political, and cultural bedrock of African societies, guiding laws, values, and social relationships (Mbiti, 1991). However, with the advent of colonialism, Western authorities, both secular and

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missionary, labeled these traditions as "primitive," "fetishistic," "superstitious," and "inhumane" (Wiredu, 1998). Such ethnocentric categorizations served a dual purpose: to delegitimize African spiritual heritage and to establish Christianity as the superior, "civilized" alternative (Mudimbe, 1988).

The impact of this historical distortion has been profound. The denigration of ATRs not only alienated Africans from their indigenous spiritualities but also eroded collective identity, as religion in African contexts is inseparable from cultural and communal life (Gyekye, 1997; Mogaji, 2025). To a large extent, many elements of ATR practice, such as rituals, sacred symbols, moral codes, find parallels in Western religious traditions, revealing that the perceived divide is more ideological than substantive (Shoko, 2016; Mogaji & Motadegbe, 2025). Yet the privileging of one over the other has reinforced structures of cultural domination and epistemic inequality. In recent decades, scholarly efforts to challenge these biases have drawn on various frameworks, from postcolonial theory to indigenous epistemology. This paper, however, adopts the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) as its theoretical framework to examine the ethnocentric issues embedded in ATRs; CSR examines the universal cognitive mechanisms underlying religious thought, such as agency detection, ritualized behavior, and symbolic reasoning (Barrett, 2000).

By focusing on shared cognitive capacities, CSR offers a powerful counter to the colonial narrative that frames ATRs as deviations from a normative standard. Instead, it enables a reinterpretation of ATRs as equally legitimate expressions of human religiosity, shaped by context-specific experiences and needs.Therefore, the paper will be divided into three main sections. The first section examines the ATRs and its mischaracterization by western ethnocentric scholars; it considers the idea of ATRs and the ethnocentric issues embedded in it. The second part presents the Cognitive Science of Religion as a theoretical framework, outlining its central claims about universal cognitive structures in religious belief and practice. It will explore how CSR can be applied to ATRs to highlight shared human religious capacities and challenge colonial hierarchies of knowledge. The last section discusses the connection between CSR and ATRs; it argues for methodological pluralism in religious studies and proposes that reframing ATRs in cognitive-universal terms is both an intellectual and cultural necessity.

African Traditional Religions and its Mischaracterization

African Traditional Religions (ATRs) have, for centuries, served as the spiritual, cultural, and moral foundation of African societies, shaping values, norms, laws, and community relationships. Scholars such as John S. Mbiti (1991) and E. Bolaji Idowu (1973) have stressed that ATRs are not mere belief systems isolated to rituals but are comprehensive worldviews in which religion permeates all aspects of life. In many African societies, religion cannot be compartmentalized as a separate domain; it informs political authority, moral conduct, social organization, and even economic activities. Mbiti (1991) famously asserted that "Africans are notoriously religious," by which he meant that religion forms the fabric of daily existence, influencing every decision and action. This intrinsic role of ATRs, however, has historically been undermined and misrepresented, especially during and after the colonial encounter,

when Western missionary and scholarly perspectives reframed these religions through ethnocentric and derogatory lenses.

With the imposition of colonialism came a systematic effort to delegitimize ATRs (Mogaji & Motadegbe, 2025). Colonial authorities, in alliance with Christian missionaries, deployed a language of denigration, labelling African religions as "primitive," "fetishistic," "superstitious," and even "inhumane" (Mudimbe, 1988; Mogaji & Motadegbe, 2025). These terms were not neutral descriptors but value-laden categories grounded in the European Enlightenment's evolutionist theories of religion, which assumed a linear progression from so-called primitive animism to monotheistic "civilized" faiths such as Christianity. For instance, E. B. Tylor (1871) described animistic African spiritual practices as the "first phase" in religious evolution, implicitly treating them as intellectually primitive. Also, historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (1963) basically declared, 'there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness,' erasing the rich indigenous histories that preceded colonial contact. Albert Schweitzer's paternalistic declarations, such as calling Africans 'my younger brother by centuries' and advocating the need to liberate them from 'torturing superstitions', reflect a deeply condescending worldview (Schweitzer, 1939). Even the racial theorist Ernest Renan contributed to these hierarchies by placing alleged 'Aryan' superiority over Semitic, and by extension, other non-Western peoples (Renan, 1896).

Such assumptions positioned ATRs as relics of an earlier stage of human thought, destined to be replaced by more "advanced" religions. As Wiredu (1998) notes, this framing "rendered African religion an inferior form of spirituality, one to be tolerated only until it could be supplanted by the true faith of the West."

One of the most damaging labels was "fetishism," a term originally popularized by European explorers and traders on the West African coast in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It referred to the attribution of supernatural powers to objects, but colonial discourse expanded it to encompass African religious life as a whole. Idowu (1973:83) criticized this portrayal, arguing that so-called "fetish objects" were often misunderstood symbols or ritual items within complex theological systems. He maintained that "to describe the whole of African religion as fetishism is not only inaccurate but derogatory, for the objects in question are neither worshipped as gods nor regarded as ends in themselves". Similarly, Mbiti (1991) emphasized that ATR practitioners recognize a Supreme Being, divinities, and ancestors, and that sacred objects are merely focal points in ritual communication with the divine, much as Christians might use crosses or icons without worshipping the material item itself.

Another common misrepresentation was the characterization of ATRs as "ancestor worship." This phrase, popularized by Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century, suggested that Africans elevated deceased relatives to the status of deities. In reality, African cosmologies generally distinguish clearly between God, lesser divinities, spirits, and ancestors. Ancestors are venerated, not worshipped; they are remembered as moral exemplars, guardians, and intermediaries, but ultimate reverence belongs to the Supreme Being. Gyekye (1997:85) clarifies that the relationship between the living and the ancestors is a form of moral reciprocity and continuity, rooted in the belief that "life is a continuum in which the living, the dead, and the yet unborn are bound together in mutual obligations". To

call this "worship" in the same sense as divine worship is, in his view, a categorical error shaped by foreign conceptual frameworks.

Such ethnocentric depictions served more than an academic purpose; they had clear political and ideological functions. By portraying ATRs as chaotic, irrational, or morally suspect, colonial regimes justified their "civilizing mission," in which Christianity and Western norms were presented as superior alternatives. Mudimbe (1988) argues that this was part of what he calls "the colonial library", a body of knowledge about Africa produced largely by Europeans, which constructed Africa as "the Other" and legitimized domination. The supposed moral and theological superiority of Christianity was invoked to replace indigenous systems of governance, law, and education, thereby eroding African cultural autonomy.

The cognitive and moral sophistication of ATRs was thus systematically obscured. Yet African scholars have long contested these distortions. Idowu (1973), Mbiti (1991), and Opoku (1978) have argued that ATRs are deeply philosophical, embodying concepts of God, morality, and human destiny that are neither simplistic nor static. Idowu (1973:104) explicitly rejects the idea that ATRs are rudimentary belief systems: "African traditional religion is not a fossil; it is a living, dynamic faith which has shaped the thought patterns and moral values of the African for centuries". Mbiti (1991) similarly contends that African religion offers a coherent metaphysical framework in which existence is understood relationally, between God, humanity, nature, and the spiritual realm.

Western anthropologists such as Robin Horton have also challenged the narrative of primitiveness. Horton (1993) draws parallels between African religious thought and scientific reasoning, arguing that both seek to explain and predict events through underlying causal principles. The difference lies not in cognitive capacity but in the domains to which these principles are applied. In his words, "traditional African thought is, like science, concerned with explanation, prediction, and control of the environment" (Horton, 1993:219). This directly counters earlier anthropological theories, such as those of Edward Tylor or James Frazer, which ranked religious systems on an evolutionary scale and placed African religion near the bottom.

Furthermore, the mischaracterization of ATRs is part of a broader epistemic injustice. Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice as the wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower, either by dismissing their credibility or by depriving them of the conceptual resources to make sense of their experiences. The colonial dismissal of ATRs as superstition denied African societies the status of credible knowers in matters of religion and philosophy. It also deprived them of the discursive space to articulate their spirituality on their own terms. Wiredu (1998) and Hountondji (1996) have both called for a decolonization of African knowledge systems, in which indigenous categories and concepts are restored to the center of analysis.

The persistence of these misrepresentations in popular and academic discourse suggests that the work of decolonizing the study of ATRs is far from complete. Stereotypes about witchcraft, ritual sacrifice, and magical thinking continue to dominate global media representations of African spirituality. As Tristan Mezzana (2011) observes, Africa is still too often depicted as "a land where absurd and childish beliefs prevail," a portrayal that both

reflects and reinforces historical prejudices. These portrayals ignore the adaptive and evolving nature of ATRs, many of which have integrated elements of Christianity and Islam while retaining their core cosmological principles.

Basically, ATRs are built on relational ontologies in which personhood is defined through community, ancestry, and harmony with the natural world. This differs from, but is not inferior to, the individualistic metaphysics often found in Western religious thought. Gyekye (1997:102) explains that "the self is not an isolated individual but a node in a web of relationships, and the moral life consists in nurturing these relationships" . Such a worldview offers rich resources for contemporary debates on ethics, environmental stewardship, and communal responsibility.

In all, the mischaracterization of African Traditional Religions stems from a convergence of colonial ideology, Eurocentric epistemology, and missionary zeal, all of which sought to undermine the legitimacy of African spiritual systems. It is on the basis of this, Agunbiade (2024: 49) asserts that " …it is evident that the impulse to protect oneself, which suggests that I should be left alone, is the primary driver of ethnocentric ethos and the main reason we frequently protect ourselves at the expense of others. These misrepresentations, manifest in terms like "primitive," "fetishistic," and "superstitious", not only distorted scholarly understanding but also inflicted lasting damage on African cultural self-perception. Against these distortions, African scholars and sympathetic anthropologists have demonstrated that ATRs are complex, dynamic, and philosophically robust, employing cognitive strategies common to all human religiosity. Recognizing this is essential not only for historical accuracy but also for dismantling the epistemic hierarchies that continue to shape the study of religion today. These persistent mischaracterizations of ATRs raise the need for a framework that can dismantle colonial hierarchies of knowledge without resorting to cultural relativism. The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) offers such a framework by locating the roots of religious belief in universal cognitive mechanisms rather than in racially or culturally specific traits. In the next section, we explore the core arguments of CSR to prepare the ground for its application to ATRs.

The Cognitive Science of Religion and its Approaches

Having established the colonial distortions surrounding ATRs, we now turn to CSR, a framework that identifies universal cognitive structures in religious thought. The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) offers a framework for explaining the widespread nature of religious belief through naturalistic, rather than theological, accounts. These explanations do not address whether religious beliefs are true; instead, they investigate why the human mind is so prone to generate, maintain, and transmit them. According to Atran (2002:4), CSR "seeks to explain religious thought and action in terms of ordinary cognitive mechanisms" . Three of the most influential lines of argument in CSR are: (1) the by-product hypothesis, particularly the cognitive salience of minimally counterintuitive concepts; (2) the role of agency detection and theory of mind (ToM); and (3) cultural-evolutionary or adaptive explanations such as moralizing gods and costly signaling. The first major argument, often called the by-product hypothesis, maintains that religion emerges from the operation of ordinary cognitive mechanisms that evolved for non-religious purposes. Pascal Boyer

(2001:79) argues that "religious concepts are by-products of ordinary cognitive functioning" rather than direct adaptations. His basic insight is that supernatural concepts that are minimally counterintuitive, that is, they violate some but not all expectations about a category, are especially memorable and thus culturally stable. For example, a tree that talks is unusual enough to be striking but still retains most of the intuitive features of a tree. Similarly in ATRs, particularly in Yoruba cosmology, an ancestor who can see the living and influence events retains human qualities but adds the counterintuitive property of supernatural perception, precisely the sort of minimally counterintuitive concept Boyer argues is most memorable and transmissible (Abimbola, 2006).[1] Boyer (2001:79) notes that "the most successful religious concepts combine a largely intuitive ontology with a small number of counterintuitive traits", making them easier to recall and transmit. Laboratory experiments by Barrett and Nyhof (2001) found that people recall minimally counterintuitive concepts significantly better than both entirely intuitive and maximally counterintuitive ones, lending empirical support to Boyer's theory. The implication is that certain supernatural ideas persist not because they are divinely revealed, but because they fit the architecture of human memory and conceptual processing.

The second pivotal argument centers on the human tendency toward agency detection, elaborated in the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD) model. Stewart Guthrie (1993:45) contends that "perceiving humanlike agency is the most efficient, and thus evolutionarily favored, strategy for interpreting ambiguous stimuli". The evolutionary logic is that missing a real agent (false negative) could be fatal, whereas mistakenly detecting one (false positive) is relatively harmless. Building on this, Justin Barrett (2004:31) argues that humans are "wired to assume that events in our environment are caused by intentional agents". Barrett calls this the HADD, a mental tool that often errs on the side of over-detecting agency. When combined with a well-developed Theory of Mind, the ability to attribute beliefs, desires, and intentions to others, this bias can easily produce beliefs in supernatural agents such as gods, spirits, or ancestors. For instance, In Shona belief, an unexpected drought may be interpreted as the deliberate act of a displeased ancestral spirit (Shoko, 2016). This attribution of intentional agency to environmental events reflects Barrett's Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD) in action, showing how universal cognitive tendencies are expressed through ATR-specific categories. Barrett (2004:31) explicitly states, "HADD and ToM working together make belief in gods and spirits virtually inevitable". This mechanism does not require prior cultural instruction; rather, it operates spontaneously, with cultural systems then shaping the specific supernatural entities people believe in.

The third major argument within CSR goes beyond individual cognition to examine the persistence and success of religious systems in cultural and evolutionary terms. Ara Norenzayan (2013:5) presents the "Big Gods" hypothesis, which posits that belief in

[1] The Yoruba, Akan, Shona, and Zulu traditions were selected because they are among the most extensively documented African Traditional Religions in both African philosophy and Cognitive Science of Religion scholarship. Collectively, they represent diverse linguistic and regional traditions across West and Southern Africa while providing well-established examples that illustrate the cognitive mechanisms examined in this paper. These cases are intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

omniscient, morally concerned deities facilitates large-scale cooperation. He writes, "Moralizing Big Gods have been crucial for the rise of large, complex societies by motivating strangers to behave cooperatively". The argument is that in societies where individuals often interact with non-kin, the belief that an all-seeing deity will punish immoral behavior deters cheating and free-riding. The Akan conception of "Nyame" as a morally concerned deity, and the Yoruba belief that certain Orisha punish oath-breakers, perform a function akin to Norenzayan's "moralizing gods." They promote honesty and cooperation beyond kinship circles, enabling social cohesion in precolonial polities(Gyekye, 1997).

Norenzayan's comparative historical analyses suggest that moralizing gods tend to appear in societies that have crossed certain population thresholds, enabling cooperation beyond the limits of kinship networks. In a related vein, Sosis and Alcorta (2003:266) use costly signaling theory to explain why demanding religious rituals persist. They argue that "costly requirements function as honest signals of commitment to the group", which helps maintain cooperation by screening out those unwilling to bear the costs. Empirical studies have shown that religious communes with more demanding rituals tend to survive longer than secular ones, suggesting that the costs of religious commitment can yield long-term collective benefits(Sosis, 2003). Among the Zulu, initiation ceremonies demand days of seclusion, strict dietary restrictions, and symbolic scarification (Berglund,1976). These costly commitments function as honest signals of group loyalty, just as Sosis and Alcorta predict, reinforcing social solidarity.

These three arguments are complementary rather than competing. Boyer's cognitive salience account explains why certain types of religious representations, especially minimally counterintuitive ones, are more likely to be remembered and transmitted. Barrett's HADD and ToM account explains why these representations often involve supernatural agents. Norenzayan's Big Gods hypothesis and Sosis's costly signaling theory explain why certain religious systems are particularly effective at sustaining large, cooperative societies. Atran (2002:8) synthesizes these levels of explanation, noting that "religion is a complex phenomenon emerging from the interaction of cognitive predispositions and socioecological pressures". In other words, religious beliefs arise easily because of human cognitive architecture, and some of those beliefs are retained and amplified because they solve social coordination problems. Therefore, the CSR framework has the advantage of offering a multi-level, integrative account of religious belief. It links proximate causes such as cognitive biases, and memory effects, with ultimate explanations like adaptive value in social coordination, and is supported by evidence from experimental psychology, developmental studies, cross-cultural anthropology, and historical sociology. This synthesis does not attempt to address the metaphysical truth of religious claims; rather, as Boyer (2001:4) puts it, "explaining why people believe does not entail explaining away the belief" .Hence, the naturalistic explanations of religious belief advanced within CSR, Boyer's by-product hypothesis and minimally counterintuitive concepts, Barrett's HADD and theory of mind model, and Norenzay's Big Gods hypothesis alongside costly signaling theory, collectively illuminate how religious beliefs arise, spread, and persist. They suggest that religious belief is neither an accident nor solely a product of cultural indoctrination, but rather an outcome of evolved cognitive architecture interacting with socioecological contexts. Whether one interprets these

findings as undermining, supporting, or neutral toward the truth claims of religion, they offer a compelling picture of why humans, across time and place, are so deeply and enduringly religious. Having outlined CSR's central claims, we can now examine how its insights apply directly to ATRs. This step not only tests CSR's universality but also reveals how African religious thought embodies the same cognitive processes found across world religions, while maintaining its distinctive cultural and philosophical dimensions.

Cognitive Science of Religion and African Traditional Religions: Is Cognitive Universal Possible?

With CSR's theoretical tools in place, we can assess whether ATRs exhibit the same cognitive universals, thereby advancing the decolonial argument outlined earlier. The relationship between Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) and African Traditional Religions (ATRs) opens a productive avenue for dismantling long-standing colonial stereotypes by situating ATRs within the broader spectrum of universal human cognitive tendencies. The earlier discussion on the mischaracterization of ATRs revealed how colonial and missionary narratives framed them as "primitive," "fetishistic," and "superstitious," thereby denying them philosophical depth and intellectual legitimacy (see Mogaji, 2025; Mogaji & Motadegbe, 2025). Such portrayals rested on the implicit assumption that African religiosity was qualitatively different, indeed inferior, to that of the West. The CSR framework, outlined in the preceding section, offers an empirical and theoretically robust way of challenging this view, as it locates the origins of religious beliefs not in any supposed racial or cultural deficiency, but in universal features of human cognition. This shift has profound implications for decolonizing the study of ATRs. CSR posits that religious thought emerges from cognitive mechanisms that are part of the shared evolutionary endowment of all humans.

Whether through Boyer's theory of minimally counterintuitive concepts, Barrett's hyperactive agency detection and theory of mind model, or Norenzayan's Big Gods hypothesis, the underlying claim is that humans everywhere, regardless of geography or culture, tend to produce and sustain certain kinds of religious representations because of the way the mind works. When these mechanisms are applied to ATRs, striking parallels emerge. For example, many ATR cosmologies include narratives about spirits, deities, and ancestors whose attributes are minimally counterintuitive, ancestors who can see and intervene in the affairs of the living, nature spirits that inhabit rivers or forests but possess human-like intentionality, or divinities who control rain, fertility, or justice. These entities conform to intuitive ontologies in many respects (ancestors are still recognizably human, nature spirits still bound to environmental domains) but include counterintuitive features that make them memorable and transmissible across generations, precisely as CSR predicts (Boyer, 2001).

Similarly, Barrett's HADD framework is particularly apt for understanding ATRs' rich spiritual ecology. The attribution of agency to natural phenomena, such as interpreting unusual animal behavior, sudden storms, or crop failures as the actions of spiritual agents, is not a sign of "primitive" thinking but an expression of a universal cognitive bias toward agency detection. ATR practitioners, like adherents of other world religions, use culturally specific categories to populate this agency space: gods, divinities, nature spirits, or ancestors. The fact that Christianity uses angels and demons while ATRs use river spirits and protective

ancestors does not indicate a cognitive gulf but rather a contextual variation on the same underlying mental process. Indeed, Barrett (2004) explicitly warns against interpreting HADD as a deficiency; it is a mental adaptation shaped by the evolutionary advantages of erring on the side of over-detecting agency. Norenzayan's Big Gods hypothesis, while often applied to large-scale societies, can also illuminate aspects of ATRs. Many African societies, especially those with expansive trade networks and complex political systems prior to colonial contact, developed religious concepts that encouraged moral behavior beyond kinship circles. For instance, in Yoruba religion, the Supreme Being (*Olódùmarè*) is considered morally concerned, even if less directly involved in daily affairs, while certain *Orisha* and ancestral spirits are believed to monitor and sanction behavior. In Akan belief, *Nyame* is the moral anchor, with ancestors acting as intermediaries to uphold communal ethics (Gyekye, 1997). Although ATRs often operate within more localized social scales than the "Axial Age" civilizations Norenzayan emphasizes, the moralizing and cooperative functions of their deities and ancestor traditions reflect the same adaptive principles CSR associates with social cohesion.

Moreover, costly rituals, such as initiation rites, seasonal festivals, and sacrificial offerings, serve as costly signals of group commitment, functioning analogously to the monastic vows or pilgrimage requirements found in other religions (Sosis & Alcorta, 2003). Recognizing these cognitive universals within ATRs is not merely an academic exercise; it is a decolonial intervention. The colonial narrative cast African religiosity as an aberration, a deviation from a supposed Western norm. CSR reframes the conversation by demonstrating that the building blocks of ATRs—agency detection, moralizing supernatural agents, mnemonic salience of counterintuitive concepts, and group-binding costly rituals, are the same cognitive building blocks that underpin Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and other traditions. This undermines the epistemic hierarchy in which Western religions are treated as the mature product of rational development while ATRs are seen as vestiges of an earlier, irrational stage.

However, while CSR's universalist approach is powerful, its application to ATRs must be sensitive to the risk of cognitive reductionism. Decolonizing the study of ATRs requires acknowledging that, although religious cognition may be universal, the meanings, functions, and expressions of those cognitive tendencies are deeply shaped by specific historical, ecological, and cultural contexts. For example, the veneration of ancestors in ATRs is not merely the output of agency detection mechanisms; it is embedded in a relational ontology in which the self is constituted through ties to the living, the dead, and the unborn (Mbiti, 1991; Gyekye, 1997). This philosophical dimension, central to African thought, cannot be fully captured by CSR's naturalistic models, which tend to focus on proximate cognitive causes rather than ultimate cultural meanings. In this sense, CSR and indigenous epistemologies should be seen as complementary rather than competing frameworks. CSR can help dismantle the myth of ATR "primitiveness" by showing its cognitive parity with other religions, while African philosophy can reassert the distinctive ethical and ontological insights that ATRs contribute to global religious discourse.

The possibility of a "cognitive universal" thus rests on holding two truths in tension: first, that all humans share evolved cognitive tendencies that make certain kinds of religious

thought recurrent across cultures; and second, that these universals are always refracted through local histories, ecologies, and value systems, producing a rich diversity of religious forms. Decolonizing the study of ATRs means refusing to collapse this diversity into a Eurocentric norm, while also refusing the colonial fiction that African religiosity is sui generis in its supposed irrationality. In this balanced view, ATRs are neither exotic curiosities nor reducible to generic cognitive templates; they are contextually grounded yet universally intelligible expressions of the human religious imagination.By bridging CSR's empirical universals with the philosophical and cultural particularities of ATRs, scholars can advance a more inclusive, methodologically pluralist study of religion. This approach restores ATRs to their rightful place in the global religious conversation—not as relics of a bygone era, but as living, dynamic systems of meaning-making that exemplify the shared cognitive endowment and the creative diversity of the human spirit.

Conclusion

The evidence from both historical critique and cognitive science makes it untenable to continue framing African Traditional Religions (ATRs) as "primitive" or "fetishistic" anomalies in the human religious landscape. Colonial-era depictions of ATRs were not objective assessments but ideological constructs designed to validate cultural domination and epistemic subordination. By contrast, the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) demonstrates that the cognitive mechanisms underlying ATRs, such as agency detection, minimally counterintuitive concepts, moralizing supernatural agents, and costly ritual signaling, are not unique to Africa but are universal features of the human mind. To acknowledge this is to dismantle the very epistemic hierarchy on which the "primitive" label rests. The argument, therefore, is not merely that ATRs can be understood as cognitive universals, but that they must be if religious studies is to be decolonized in any substantive sense.

The present study does not suggest that CSR should be applied uniquely to African Traditional Religions. Rather, it argues that the same cognitive mechanisms employed to explain Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and other world religions should be applied symmetrically to ATRs. Future research may undertake a more extensive comparative application of CSR across these traditions to further demonstrate the universality of religious cognition. Retaining a special category for ATRs, as if they require exotic or exceptional explanations, perpetuates the colonial division between "civilized" and "uncivilized" belief. Recognizing ATRs as expressions of shared human cognitive architecture affirms their parity with all other world religions while still allowing for their distinctive philosophical contributions, particularly their relational ontologies and communal moral frameworks. Decolonization here is not a matter of cultural charity but of intellectual integrity. If CSR's universals apply equally to Christianity's angels and saints, Islam's jinn, Hinduism's devas, and ATRs' ancestors and divinities, then any scholarly framework that continues to marginalize ATRs is methodologically inconsistent and ethically suspect. The imperative is clear: to integrate ATRs fully into the comparative study of religion as both cognitively universal and culturally particular, thereby ending the lingering colonial fiction that their legitimacy requires external validation. This is the necessary intellectual and moral shift from "primitive religion" to cognitive universal.

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