



## RATIONALIZATION: ITS EFFECTS ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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### Abstract

*Rationalization, the process through which traditional beliefs and practices are systematically analyzed and adapted to fit modern frameworks, poses significant challenges to African Traditional Religion (ATR), which has long been the bedrock of African identity, spirituality, and cultural heritage. This paper investigates the multifaceted effects of rationalization on ATR, exploring how the shift towards logical and empirical explanations undermines the mystical and spiritual dimensions intrinsic to indigenous practices. This paper aims to contribute to the discourse on the ongoing tension between modernization and the preservation of indigenous cultural practices, ultimately advocating for a balance that respects both traditional and contemporary dimensions of African spirituality. This research makes use of the culture-area approach method in its work. It recommends, among other the avoidance of over-rationalization, reductionism, and disconnection from communal practices. By acknowledging and navigating these complexities, ATR can maintain its unique spiritual and cultural heritage while adapting to the challenges and opportunities of the modern world.*

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, Effects, Rationalization.

### Introduction

According to Nweke (2020), "African Traditional Religion is one of the religions of the world. This religion has contributed a lot to humanity because it is the bedrock and pace setter to all other Religions of the world, like Christianity, Islam, etc." (p.42). This African Traditional Religion (ATR) has long served as the cornerstone of African spirituality, culture, and identity. Its intricate tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and practices is deeply embedded in the worldview of many African societies. According to Nweke (2025), "African Traditional Religion (ATR) encompasses the indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices passed down through generations among African societies"(p.136). Nweke (2025) further says that "Embedded in communal living and respect for ancestors, African Traditional Religion holds that the spiritual world influences daily life and governs moral behavior"(p. 136). However, the advent of rationalization, defined as the process in which traditional ways of life are systematically analyzed, codified, and modified to align with modern thought, poses a significant challenge to ATR (Weber, 1968). Rationalism or rationalization has been identified by Nweke as one of the greatest enemies of ATR because of the serious dent that it has put on most religious activities in Africa (Nweke, 2017, p.149). Rationalization often seeks to replace mystical and spiritual explanations with logical, scientific, or systematic frameworks (Weber, 1968, p.114). While this has facilitated modernization in many aspects of human life, its effects on indigenous religions, particularly ATR, remain complex and multifaceted. Nweke (2025), noted, "modernization has been one of the major contributors of secularization in Africa"(p.152).



This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the effects of rationalization on ATR, focusing on two key areas: what rationalization and ATR are, and the effects of rationalization on ATR. By exploring these dimensions, this paper highlights the double-edged nature of rationalization to the African Traditional Religion. By this we mean how negatively rationalism has affected the deeply revered traditions, customs, and practices of the African people, and also how positively it has merged African practices, customs, and traditions with modernity.

### Definition of Terms

**Rationalization:** Rationalization, in the words of Innocent Nweke (2017) “is a social issue based on logic rather than belief or superstition” (p.148). And this concept has had significant implications for African Traditional Religion (ATR). Rationalization, as a concept, was extensively discussed by Max Weber as a systematic replacement of traditional customs and spiritual beliefs with modes of thinking driven by logic and efficiency (Weber, 1968). This concept has had far-reaching effects on religious systems worldwide, particularly in African Traditional Religion (ATR). To buttress this point further, Nweke explains that the concept of rationalization is seeking to destroy everything that stands against normal logic and reason. He maintains that many religious bodies have lost their followers who embraced the movement of rational thinking (Nweke, 2017, 151). ATR, deeply rooted in African cultures and worldview, embodies a rich tapestry of spiritual practices, moral codes, African understanding of life, and communal rituals. However, the intrusion of rationalization, fueled by colonialism, modernity, and globalization, has significantly altered its structure and practice. More so, Scholars like Ekeh (1994) and Gyekye (1997) have discussed how this concept plays out in African contexts, particularly in the realms of religion and culture. Rationalization often manifests as a reductionist approach, categorizing indigenous practices as irrational or primitive and fetishistic.

Rationalism, as a process of employing logic, reason, and science in the quest for truth, has significantly played a role in demystifying ATR in many ways. Sociologically, one could say, rationalism has enabled sociologists to study ATR from an objective point of view, focusing on its social functions rather than from a mystical perspective. Mbiti (1990), for instance, famously stated that Africans are notoriously religious and that religion could be found in every aspect of the life of an African (p.2). This statement, does not only underscores the social nature of religion to the Africans, but also the mystical aspect of religiosity in their lives. Thus, if the rationalist reduces ATR to only some sort of social control, it undermines or demystifies the spiritual sense attached to the reverence Africans give to their deities, cultures, and practices.

More so, philosophy, which is a product of rationalism, can also demystify religion. This is because philosophy approaches religion from its logic, coherence, sense, soundness, etc. ATR, on the other hand, has some practices and rituals which can only make sense when looked at mystically. For instance, sacrifices of Animals to the deity, after which people gather and eat from the sacrifice. This only makes sense if interpreted from a mystical point of view. A logical interpretation of such sacrifices would be merriment and feasting. However, from the eyes of a practitioner of ATR, such sacrifices would be appeasement and blessing solicitations.

**African Traditional Belief:** African Traditional Religion, according to scholars like Nweke, is “the way of life of the African and the way Africans worship their God (Nweke, 2022, p.4). Likewise, Njoh and Akiwumi (2012) argue similarly to Nweke that one major feature of traditional African religion is that it is a way of life for Africans (p.5). Africans’ *modus*



*operandi* are inextricably intertwined with their religions. This is why Nweke asserts that "... The nature of this traditional religion, as expressed in many African communities is communal and pragmatic, which implies that people born into the traditional community were also born into a religion in which they, naturally, participated as they grew up through the traditional socialization processes"(p.137). In addition to the already given definitions of ATR, a far clearer and more elaborate definition would be the one given by Ekwunife (1990) that ATR are:

those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture, transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths, and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings and names), sacred specialist and persons, sacred space and objects and religious works of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities" (p.1).

Nweke (2020) wrote " African Traditional Religion cannot be discussed without mentioning that it is the way of life of the people of Africa and cannot be differentiated from the politics, education, and socialization etc"(p.43) Nweke (2020) further said that " African Traditional Religion is found in almost all activities of the African man"(p.43).

Ekwunife would even go further to give some intrinsic characteristics of ATR, which are part of its definition. These characteristics for Ekwunife are;

1. It is, first of all, traditional
2. Also, it is a revealed religion with has no founder like some of the modern religions.
3. The religion has no sacred scriptures or creedal form; it is essentially transmitted orally from generation to generation (Ekwunife, 1990).

### **Effects of Rationalization**

Rationalization, as defined as the systematic organization and application of logical reasoning to cultural, social, and religious phenomena, is like to double-edged sword. It has both positive and negative effects.

#### **Positive Effects of Rationalization**

While rationalization has often been criticized for its role in demystifying African values, and as such posited negatively. This is, however, not entirely true, for rationalization also has a positive influence on ATR. And some of these positive influences are;

***Rationalization and the Preservation of Core Values:*** Rationalization has contributed to the preservation of ATR's core values, such as community, interconnectedness, and reverence for ancestors. In the process of rationalization, traditional African spiritual practices have been documented, codified, and analyzed, ensuring their survival amidst globalization.

As Mbiti (1990) notes, "African religion is by its very nature a communal faith, with the spiritual and material worlds closely interconnected" (p. 21). Rationalization has provided a framework for these interconnected beliefs to be communicated in academic and interfaith settings. For instance, rituals once dismissed as "primitive" are now understood as sophisticated expressions of symbolic communication, embodying environmental stewardship and social



harmony (Parrinder, 1962). Rationalization has made African Traditional Religion look primitive; this is why Nweke(2025) noted that " ... African Traditional Religion in contrast is often portrayed in global narratives as outdated"(p.140).

The emphasis on codifying oral traditions has also fostered educational curricula that teach ATR in schools and universities, ensuring its longevity. By translating oral traditions into written texts, rationalization has made ATR accessible to a global audience while preserving its indigenous essence.

***Enhancing Adaptability in Modern Contexts:*** ATR's ability to adapt to contemporary realities is another positive outcome of rationalization. In urbanized and globalized contexts, ATR has evolved to address issues like gender equity, environmental conservation, and social justice.

As Wiredu (1996) argues, "the rationalization of African thought systems is not a rejection of tradition but an effort to integrate it into a world that is increasingly shaped by science and reason" (p. 45). For example, traditional healing practices, once exclusively based on mysticism, have integrated scientific knowledge to improve efficacy and credibility. Institutions like the African Indigenous Knowledge Systems Centre have demonstrated how traditional knowledge systems can address modern challenges, such as climate change and sustainable development (Mawere, 2015, p. 89).

Nweke agrees with the fact that the killing of twins by the Igbo people of Nigeria died off due to the rational logic behind the ideas of the Christian faith. He maintains that the rationalists should be given kudos for their idea and initiative, which brought the killing of twins to an end (Nweke, 2007, 149).

Furthermore, rationalization has allowed ATR practitioners to reinterpret gender roles within their religious framework. Scholars like Amadiume (1997) highlight how feminist interpretations of ATR challenge patriarchal norms, creating a more inclusive religious landscape.

***Fostering Inter-religious Dialogue:*** Rationalization has facilitated inter-religious dialogue by positioning ATR as a coherent and credible worldview. Through comparative studies, ATR has been recognized for its unique contributions to global religious thought, such as its ecological ethics and holistic spirituality.

John Mbiti's (1969) seminal work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, underscores how ATR can enrich global religious discourse by emphasizing the communal aspect of spirituality. "Religion in Africa is a matter of 'being' rather than 'doing,' a perspective that challenges individualistic notions of faith prevalent in Western contexts" (Mbiti, 1969, p. 12). This rationalized articulation of ATR has enabled scholars and practitioners to engage with Christianity, Islam, and other faiths on equal footing.

Moreover, rationalization has provided a platform for ATR practitioners to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions perpetuated by colonial narratives. By emphasizing the logical and ethical underpinnings of ATR, rationalization has fostered mutual respect among diverse religious communities.

### **Negative Effects of Rationalization**



On the other hand, in as rationalization has some positive effects on ATR, its negative effects cannot be undermined. Nweke (2025) has said that "... Because of the modernity, some of the Africans began to rationalize the core values, customs, indigenous religion, and it's ritual by equating the teachings of the ancestors with western scientific methodology and proof; philosophy, and theology"(p.155). In the African context, traditional religions, rooted in spirituality, symbolism, and oral traditions, have faced significant challenges due to rationalization. And some of these challenges are;

***Disintegration of Oral Traditions:*** Rationalization has contributed to the erosion of oral traditions, which form the backbone of ATR. Unlike Western religious systems, ATR relies heavily on oral storytelling, proverbs, and rituals to transmit knowledge and values. Rationalization's emphasis on written documentation and empirical validation undermines these practices, rendering them irrelevant in modern societies.

According to Mbiti (1990), "oral traditions represent the library of the African people, containing their wisdom, beliefs, and worldview" (p. 45). However, the introduction of Western education systems, Christianity, and rationalist ideologies has devalued these traditions. For instance, African myths and spiritual narratives are often dismissed as mere folklore rather than valid epistemologies. The rationalist critique fails to appreciate the symbolic depth of these traditions, leading to their gradual disappearance. Nweke (2025) asserts, "the arrival of Christianity in Africa has significantly impacted African Traditional Religion, leading to a decline in its Practice and visibility in many communities"(p.137)

***Loss of Communal Identity:*** Rationalization also undermines the communal nature of ATR by promoting individualism, a hallmark of Western modernity. ATR is inherently communal, emphasizing collective rituals and shared responsibilities. Rationalization, however, prioritizes efficiency, bureaucracy, and individual achievement, values that clash with the communal ethos of ATR.

Gyekye (1997) argues that "the communal structure of African societies is a direct extension of their religious worldview, where the individual exists primarily as a part of the community" (p. 55). Rationalization disrupts this dynamic, as modern institutions encourage Africans to prioritize personal gain over communal welfare. This shift has weakened the bonds that sustain ATR, reducing its relevance in contemporary African societies.

***Marginalization of African Spirituality:*** The spread of rationalist ideologies has marginalized African spirituality, positioning it as inferior to Western religions and secular philosophies. Rationalization promotes a scientific worldview that often dismisses spiritual practices as irrational or primitive. This perspective has facilitated the dominance of Christianity and Islam, which are perceived as more "rational" and "civilized" than ATR.

Weber's theory of disenchantment aptly captures this phenomenon. He posits that rationalization leads to the "disenchantment of the world," where spiritual and mystical elements are replaced by a calculable, predictable order (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 29). In the African context, this disenchantment has led to the decline of traditional rituals, divination practices, and ancestor veneration, as they are seen as incompatible with modern rational thought.

***Cultural Alienation and Identity Crisis:*** The rationalization of African societies has also led to cultural alienation and an identity crisis among Africans. By imposing Western standards of





logic and reason, rationalization delegitimizes indigenous knowledge systems, forcing Africans to conform to foreign paradigms. This alienation manifests in the abandonment of traditional practices and the adoption of Western lifestyles and values. This is why Nweke (2025) said "the traditional values and the religious practices are usually marginalised"(p.157).

Wiredu (1980) observes that "the imposition of Western rationalist ideologies has created a cultural void, where Africans are neither fully traditional nor fully modern" (p. 73). This identity crisis undermines the resilience of ATR, as younger generations increasingly view it as outdated and irrelevant.

**Vulnerability to external critiques:** Rationalization can make ATR more vulnerable to external critiques and attacks, particularly from those who may not fully understand or appreciate the tradition's complexities and depths. For instance, Frobenius a 20<sup>th</sup> century German scholar, in his so-called rational description of ATR called it a religion of the negro race, confine with fetishism and their brutal and often cannibalistic customs, their vulgar and repulsive idols...the most primitive instinct determines the lives and conduct of negroes, who lack any kind of ethical inspiration" (Frobenius, 1931 p. xiii").

**Environmental Degradation:** The rationalization process has a detrimental impact on our environment. When individuals started demanding evidence for the preservation of our sacred forests, they did not hesitate to destroy them. This not only affects the spirituality of Africans but also leads to environmental degradation. This is why Nweke (2025) asserts, "Industrialization of society has contributed to climate change, deforestation due to the establishment of industrial sites, and pollution of both the environment and the atmosphere" (p. 157).

**Misunderstanding:** Modernization, which leads to Rationalization, has created a vacuum between the traditional principles and those of modern principles. Nweke (2025) noted, "This menace has brought about misconceptions and conflicts which often resulted in a lack of appreciation for the indigenous cultures and practices through writings and public speech"(p.155).

### **Hope for the Continuity of African Traditional Religion**

Amidst all the negative effects on African Traditional Religion by rationalization, the religion is still waxing strong and finding its place back in the lives of many African people. According to Nweke (2025), "African Traditional Religion has displayed a remarkable resilience"(p.142). Nweke (2025) further asserts that " In many parts of Africa, Traditional practices continue to thrive, particularly in rural areas where Christianity has not entirely displaced Indigenous beliefs"(p.142).

### **Evaluation and Suggestions**

Evaluating African Traditional Religion through the lens of rationalization is problematic because such evaluations do neglect the unique characteristics of these indigenous religious traditions. This is because, rationalization as an approach does not fully capture the complexities of non-Western cultures and religions (Asante, 1987). On the other hand, it would also be irrational not to use one's God giving rational faculties in accessing practices that affect him and those around him. For this reason, we could say that rationalization is as important as ATR and that both are needed.



In some African cultures, we hear of the killing of twins as part of the practices of such cultures (Nweke, 2015, p.149). Moreover, African traditional societies are highly male-dominated. And in most of these cultures, women are reduced to the role of giving birth and taking care of the children and the house. This systemic and institutionalized chauvinism has reduced the potentiality of women and their ability to grow beyond the strata that society has limited them to. Not also mention some toxic cultures in ATR like burying a king with two live human beings. This happens among the Asante people in Ghana. In the Asante culture, when a king dies, some people have to be buried with the king. Stories have it that there is a particular clan whose responsibility is to be buried with the king. But the rationalization, we can say some of the extreme cultures have been accessed in the light of modernity and their validity questioned.

- But the vices of ATR do not mean that rationalization for instance, is an impeccable thing. It also has its challenges that we Africans are still trying to fathom. Nweke (2015) for instance, describes rationalization as one of the greatest enemies of our religion (p.149). This is because rationalization has come to distort our African values. Nweke noted that before the arrival of foreign ways of thinking in our society, marriage was still God do us apart. But today, this practice is no longer taken seriously. Moreover, sex, which was reserved for only married couples, is also rationalized to be an adventure for everyone. Using Nweke's very words, "We now live in a sex-perverse society which believes in the liberty of a person to do with oneself as he pleases so long as he has passed the age of consent in the society" (Nweke 2015, p.150). This sexual liberation in the name of rationalization has brought about HIV/AIDS, unfaithfulness, divorces, and some new sexual norms like same sex marriage. For these reasons, rationalization also has a red flag. That is why this work would suggest a balance between the two.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, the double-edged nature of rationalization in African Traditional Religion highlights the need for a balanced approach. While rationalization can bring clarity, contextualization, and empowerment, it is essential to avoid over-rationalization, reductionism, and disconnection from communal practices. By acknowledging and navigating these complexities, ATR can maintain its unique spiritual and cultural heritage while adapting to the challenges and opportunities of the modern world.

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