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Review

The Colonisation of the Sacred Self: African Spirituality, Colonial Christianity, and the Moral Psychology of Lived Experience

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Abstract

This paper argues that the colonial introduction of Christianity in Africa must be understood as a reordering of personhood, moral feeling, and the conditions under which lived experience becomes intelligible, rather than as a change in formal religious affiliation alone. Drawing on scholarship in African philosophy, religious history, European intellectual history, and African psychology, the paper traces how missionary Christianity reclassified African spiritual worlds, recoded suffering and misfortune, and disrupted the transmission of spiritual knowledge across generations. Crucially, it situates this encounter within the longer history of Christianity's own disenchantment: the suppression, within dominant Protestant and Enlightenment traditions, of enchanted practices that had characterised European Christianity for over a millennium. The missionary traditions that condemned African spirit mediation, ancestral veneration, and ritual healing were carriers of a tradition that had practised structurally analogous things before disciplining them out of its own self-understanding. The paper shows that colonial religion produced layered forms of subjectivity in which ancestral obligation, Christian doctrine, communal personhood, moral anxiety, and therapeutic pluralism coexist in tension. The concept of *ontological compression* is proposed to name the condition under which parts of the self become unsayable within authorised vocabularies, a condition rendered doubly intense by the fact that the compressing tradition had already performed this narrowing upon itself. Rather than treating African spirituality as residue, superstition, or cultural background, the paper proposes that it should be approached as a living philosophical and psychological archive through which many people continue to interpret suffering, relation, responsibility, and reality itself.

Keywords: African spirituality; colonial Christianity; personhood; African psychology; moral psychology; indigenous knowledge; lived experience; decolonial philosophy

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1. Introduction

The study of religion in Africa is often caught between two unsatisfying habits. One frames Christianity as a civilising force that displaced older practices and introduced a new moral order, echoing missionary and colonial accounts of conversion as uplift (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Maxwell 2006; Mokotso 2021). The other treats African spirituality as a timeless substrate that simply survives beneath formal conversion, a view that can flatten historical change and reproduce the unanimist tendencies criticised in African philosophy and religious studies (Hountondji 1983; Mbiti 1969; Sanneh 1989). Neither will do. The first repeats colonial self-understandings. The second romanticises continuity and underestimates the depth of psychic, conceptual, and institutional change. What requires closer attention is the remaking of the self under conditions of colonial power, a remaking

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that Fanon recognised as reaching into the colonised subject's most intimate relationship with their own body, feeling, and self-regard (Fanon 1967).

This paper takes that problem as its central concern, but it also introduces a dimension that existing scholarship on the colonial Christian encounter in Africa has largely neglected: the history of Christianity's own disenchantment. Many of the missionaries who arrived in Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were heirs to a tradition that had, for over a thousand years, inhabited an enchanted world of saints' relics, miraculous healing, spirit discernment, protective objects, and ongoing mediation between the living and the dead (Thomas 1971; Taylor 2007). The Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment had suppressed many of these practices within dominant strands of European Christianity, producing what Taylor (2007) calls the shift from "porous" to "buffered" selves. The Christianity that reached African shores in missionary form was therefore substantially, though unevenly, a post-enchantment religion, thinned out by centuries of internal discipline. Yet the spiritual worlds it encountered in Africa bore deep structural resemblances to the enchanted Christianity that Europe itself had practised and then disavowed. This genealogy matters because it reveals the colonial encounter as shaped by a specific historical amnesia: many missionaries condemned in Africa what their own tradition had harboured for centuries.

The concept of the sacred self is central to the argument. The phrase does not imply a timeless spiritual essence. It refers to a mode of subjectivity in which relation to the invisible (to ancestors, to moral memory, to communal obligation) remains constitutive of selfhood. By "self," this paper means something other than the bounded, autonomous interior subject of liberal individualist thought. Following Csordas's paradigm of embodiment, in which culture and self are grounded in bodily experience, perception, and intersubjective practice (Csordas 1994), the sacred self is understood here as an embodied and relational formation: a way of inhabiting moral obligations, spiritual relations, social memory, and bodily feeling that is shaped within, and remains oriented toward, the invisible and the communal. Colonial Christianity disciplined this self, renamed it, shamed aspects of it, and forced it to negotiate new terms of visibility and legitimacy.

The paper's further claim is that existing vocabulary for describing this condition (syncretism, hybridity, dual belonging) remains insufficient. What is needed is a concept that registers the epistemic violence involved when parts of the self become publicly unspeakable. The paper proposes ontological compression for this purpose: the narrowing of what can be spoken, felt, and recognised as real within the vocabularies that colonial and postcolonial institutions authorise. The concept gains additional force from the genealogy sketched above, because the compressing tradition had already performed a version of this narrowing upon itself during the Reformation.

The claim needs care. There is no singular African spirituality, no single Christian encounter, and no uniform colonial psychology. The continent contains immense differences in language, region, cosmology, confession, class, gender, and historical trajectory. The same caution applies to Christianity: there is no singular European Christianity, no uniform relation to enchantment, and no single missionary posture toward healing, ritual, or invisible causality. African Christianity was never only an imposed faith. Africans appropriated, translated, indigenised, and redirected it in ways that exceeded missionary control, a process Sanneh has described as the vernacularisation of Christianity through local languages and conceptual worlds (Sanneh 1989; Bediako 1995). African Independent Churches, prophetic movements, and more recently Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity all demonstrate this generative capacity. Any serious account must refuse two simplifications simultaneously: the fantasy of total rupture and the fantasy of untouched continuity.

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This paper places four studiliteratures into sustained conversation: African philosophy, histories of mission Christianity, European intellectual history of religion, and African psychology. It proceeds in six steps. It begins by clarifying scope, terminology, and method. It then examines colonial Christianity as a project of reclassification, situating missionary religion within the longer European history of disenchantment while attending to the ambiguities of mission medicine and healing. The following section turns to African philosophical accounts of personhood and the sacred, engaging debates within African philosophy about the status and limits of these accounts. From there, the paper develops an account of moral psychology under religious coloniality, drawing on Fanon and foregrounding gender. The next section considers how these dynamics manifest in lived experience, particularly in therapeutic itineraries, mourning, ancestral relations, and ontological compression. The discussion argues for a decolonial psychology of religion while acknowledging the framework's limits.

2. Review Method and Scope

This article is a critical interpretive review. It does not present new empirical data, nor does it claim the comprehensiveness of a formal systematic review. Its aim is conceptual rather than exhaustive. The paper brings into dialogue scholarship from African philosophy, African religious history, European intellectual history, mission studies, African psychology, and mental health research to clarify a shared problem: how colonial Christianity reshaped the self and how that history continues to structure lived experience in African contexts.

The review was guided by five questions. First, how have scholars described the relation between Christianity and indigenous religious practice in Africa? Second, what was the state of Christianity's own spiritual and enchanted traditions before the mission encounter, and how did the Reformation and Enlightenment reshape them? Third, what concepts of personhood, moral life, invisible causality, and ancestral continuity have been central to African philosophical and psychological thought, and what internal debates have shaped these concepts? Fourth, in what ways did mission Christianity and colonial institutions, including their gendered disciplinary architectures, alter the terms through which African subjects interpreted themselves and their worlds? Fifth, how do these histories remain visible in contemporary practices of healing, grief, moral self-understanding, and the transmission of spiritual knowledge?

The body of literature spans classic and recent work, with emphasis on studies published between 2015 and 2025 where they sharpen current debates. Foundational texts in African philosophy, anti-colonial thought, the ethnophilosophy debate, European religious history, and medical anthropology are used because later scholarship often presumes them. Three scope decisions should be made explicit. First, the paper focuses primarily on the encounter between African spiritual traditions and Christianity because of Christianity's specific entanglement with colonial expansion, mission schooling, and the codification of religion under colonial governance. Islam is indispensable to African religious history; it preceded Christianity across much of West Africa, the Sahel, the Swahili coast, and the Horn, and profoundly shaped the spiritual and philosophical landscape into which Christianity later intervened. However, the logics of Islamic encounter differ sufficiently from those of colonial Christian mission to warrant separate sustained treatment. Second, the paper's geographical and historical examples are drawn predominantly from sub-Saharan contexts. The distinct Coptic and Ethiopian Christian histories of northeastern Africa would require their own genealogies. Third, the term "African spirituality" is used cautiously as a heuristic rather than a claim of unity. As Hountondji warned, umbrella categories in African intellectual life risk producing the appearance of a collective philosophy where diverse and sometimes contradictory positions actually exist (Hountondji 1983; Olupona 2014).

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3. Colonial Christianity, Disenchantment, and the Reclassification of Reality

3.1. Christianity's Suppressed Enchantment

Understanding the colonial encounter requires understanding what Christianity had been before it arrived in Africa. For much of its history, European Christianity inhabited an enchanted world. Saints functioned as intercessors between the living and the divine; their relics were believed to heal the sick, protect communities, and mediate invisible forces (Thomas 1971). Medieval Christians sought the proximity of holy remains when planting crops, burying relatives, or launching ships. Healing rituals, protective amulets, pilgrimages to miracle-working shrines, and discernment of spirits (the formal practice of distinguishing divine from demonic possession) were woven into the fabric of ordinary Christian life (Thomas 1971; Taylor 2007). The visible and invisible were interpenetrating; causality was understood to move through spiritual as well as material channels; and the dead remained active agents whose sanctified bodies could intervene in the affairs of the living.

Thomas's landmark study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England demonstrates the extent to which magic, astrology, divination, and spiritual healing flourished alongside official Christianity, often entangled with it (Thomas 1971). The medieval Catholic Church's sacraments, holy water, consecrated objects, and exorcism rites all carried what Thomas describes as a "magical" dimension, in the sense that ordinary believers treated them as efficacious instruments rather than symbolic acts. Priests blessed fields against blight, rang church bells to dispel storms, and administered sacramental remedies for illness.

The Reformation changed this substantially. Protestant reformers, especially Calvinists, undertook a systematic purge of many of these practices, regarding them as superstition that arrogated to human ritual a power belonging to God alone (Thomas 1971; Taylor 2007). Taylor describes this as a decisive moment in Western disenchantment: the creation of "buffered" selves, sealed off from the porous, spirit-saturated world that had characterised pre-modern Christianity (Taylor 2007). The Enlightenment extended this process, relocating causality from the spiritual to the natural, and reframing enchantment as irrationality. By the time Protestant missionaries reached Africa in significant numbers during the nineteenth century, they carried a version of Christianity that had already compressed much of its own spiritual world. Saints had been demoted, relics discredited, many healing rituals abandoned, and the enchanted cosmos substantially replaced by a rationalised theology of individual conscience and moral discipline.

A caveat is essential here. The paper does not claim that all European Christianity became uniformly disenchanted, nor that Protestantism simply replaced ritual with rationality (Walsham 2008). The history is considerably more tangled. Some Protestant traditions retained strong beliefs in demonic agency, as the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries demonstrate; some Catholic communities maintained enchanted practices well into modernity; and early modern figures associated with astronomy, astrology, natural philosophy, and occult practice confound any clean enchantment/disenchantment binary. The argument is more specific: that certain dominant missionary and colonial forms of Christianity carried with them a disciplined suspicion of spirit mediation, ritual efficacy, and invisible causality, even while European Christianity itself remained internally diverse and unevenly disenchanted. It was this particular formation, shaped by Calvinist discipline, Enlightenment rationalism, and bourgeois moral pedagogy, that was most forcefully exported to Africa through the mission encounter.

This genealogy is crucial because it reveals a historical amnesia at the heart of that encounter. Many missionaries condemned in Africa practices that bore structural resem-

blance to what European Christianity had itself harboured for centuries: spirit mediation, ancestral-like veneration, healing through sacred objects, and belief in invisible causality. The reclassification they imposed was therefore shaped by a double movement. Christianity had first enchanted the world and then, within its dominant Protestant and Enlightenment strands, disenchanted it; it then arrived in Africa and encountered enchanted worlds that mirrored its own suppressed past.

3.2. Reclassification in the Colonial Encounter

One of the most consequential achievements of mission Christianity was classification, rather than conversion in the narrow sense. Colonial religious power worked by deciding what counted as religion in the first place. Mokotso's analysis of Lesotho is especially sharp here. He argues that missionary coloniality generated "religious illiteracy" by categorising Basotho as a people without religion, by making religion synonymous with Christianity, and by disqualifying other spiritual forms through education and the secular-religious split (Mokotso 2021). If people can be categorised as lacking religion, conversion appears as uplift rather than domination.

This reclassification redistributed ontology. Practices once transmitted through kinship, apprenticeship, ritual participation, and everyday communal life were newly exposed to suspicion, concealment, or translation into alien categories. Spirit possession, ancestral obligation, ritual mediation, divination, and land-based cosmologies were redescribed as paganism, superstition, witchcraft, or custom. What had previously organised social and moral life was pushed outside the domain of legitimate knowledge. Segalo and Cakata describe a parallel process within psychology: colonialism made African knowledges appear inferior by erasing indigenous languages from authorised spaces of reason, thereby severing language from forms of being and knowing (Segalo and Cakata 2017).

The Comaroffs' account of the encounter between the London Missionary Society and the southern Tswana demonstrates how this reclassification operated at the level of everyday practice. Christianity entered Tswana life through clothing, architecture, hygiene, agriculture, and domestic arrangement, through the body and its habits, long before it consolidated as a formal doctrine (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Wariboko extends this argument by describing the colonial Christian encounter as a "long conversation" through which British personhood was worked out on African soil, focused on the black body in practice (Wariboko 2018). Conversion was therefore disciplinary pedagogy.

The question of healing illuminates the ambiguity of this process with particular clarity. Mission Christianity was never simply anti-healing. It frequently operated through medical care, and medical missions constituted one of the primary modes of colonial Christian engagement with African communities. Yet, as Ranger's study of the Universities Mission to Central Africa in southeastern Tanzania demonstrates, mission medicine combined scientific rationality with Christian evangelicalism in ways that were deeply ambiguous (Ranger 1981). The Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) offered medical services, but its capacity to compete with indigenous healing was limited; and within African Christian communities, alternative therapeutic practices persisted and flourished despite missionary disapproval (Ranger 1981). Ranger shows that the mission ultimately failed to maintain the boundaries it set between legitimate (Christian-medical) and illegitimate (indigenous-spiritual) healing. The rise in African prophetic healing movements within and around mission Christianity demonstrates that Africans refused the missionary monopoly on healing authority. The reclassification of healing was therefore contested from the outset: missionaries sought to determine which forms of care were rational and which were superstitious, but African communities continually transgressed those boundaries.

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This disciplinary architecture was fundamentally gendered. Colonial mission stations reorganised domestic life according to Victorian and bourgeois European norms of femininity, motherhood, and household management. Oyěwùmí has argued that Western gender categories were themselves imposed upon African societies that did not always organise social life along the same axes (Oyěwùmí 1997). Whether or not one accepts her strongest claims, mission Christianity arrived with a specific gendered moral programme: the cultivation of the Christian wife, the educated mother, the respectable household. Women's spiritual authority (as mediums, diviners, and healers) was especially vulnerable to missionary suspicion, even as women also became active agents within the new churches. Nourse documents this dual position, showing women as mediums, healers, prophets, ministers, and mystics inhabiting plural religious worlds and actively reshaping Christianity from within (Nourse 2021).

The process was never uniform. Early evangelisation in nineteenth-century southern Africa operated differently from high-colonial mission work in early twentieth-century Kenya, which in turn differed from the post-independence explosion of African Initiated Churches. Cunningham's study of colonial Kenya shows how Christian "improvement" and medical care became entangled with labour discipline, coercion, incarceration, and the production of the "able-bodied male native" within settler capitalism (Cunningham 2023). Peel's account of the Yoruba encounter with Christianity demonstrates a case in which conversion unfolded within a complex, already literate, and theologically sophisticated indigenous context, producing forms of religious encounter irreducible to simple domination (Peel 2000). Maxwell notes that mission churches were deeply implicated in colonialism, even where that implication was ambivalent, and that they frequently disparaged African culture while shaping a modernising elite (Maxwell 2006).

A rigorous account must resist totalising missionary power. Africans translated scripture into local languages in ways that often exceeded and subverted missionary intention, a process Sanneh has argued made African Christianity genuinely indigenous from the moment of vernacular translation (Sanneh 1989; Bediako 1995). Independent churches, prophetic movements, and Zionist congregations in southern Africa all represent forms of spiritual recombination driven by African agents. These movements drew from Christianity selectively while refusing its claim to exclusive authority over the sacred. That complexity should not, however, soften the central argument. Even when appropriated, Christianity often arrived through categories already structured by colonial asymmetry and by the specific spiritual amnesia that the dominant missionary tradition had internalised.

4. Personhood, Vitality, and the Sacred in African Philosophy

To grasp what was at stake in this encounter, one must understand the conceptual terrain upon which colonial Christianity intervened. African philosophical work on personhood has long argued that the human being exceeds biological individuality. Menkiti's classic distinction between being a human being and becoming a person remains a key reference point, though it has attracted sustained critique (Menkiti 1984). Gyekye challenged Menkiti's strong communitarianism, arguing that communal constitution of personhood need not obliterate individual moral agency, and that a moderate communitarianism better reflects the complexity of African social thought (Gyekye 1997). This internal debate matters because it shows that African philosophical accounts of personhood contain genuine disagreement about the balance between communal embeddedness and individual responsibility, disagreements that colonial Christianity overrode with its own framework rather than resolving.

Molefe and Maraganedzha sharpen the point by arguing that in African moral philosophy, personhood is often normative rather than descriptive: one becomes a person

in the fuller sense through socio-moral achievement (Molefe and Maraganedzha 2023). Morality is therefore inseparable from ontology. Nwoye, writing from within African psychology, describes African personhood as socio-culturally derived, shaped by enduring forces that convert a human infant into a mature being-in-relation-with-others (Nwoye 2017). In his account, the visible and invisible are interdependent and interpenetrating. This claim should be received critically. Scholars have noted that "both-and" formulations can become convenient theoretical shorthand, obscuring real tensions, contradictions, and power dynamics within African religious practice. Lived experience is often messier than "both-and" implies, a point the present paper's discussion of moral anxiety and divided legitimacy will illustrate.

The issue extends to questions of vitality, continuity, and the unfinished relation between the living and the dead. Attoe's re-examination of African views on death shows how several traditions conceive consciousness, vital force, or subjective continuity as surviving bodily death, with ancestors remaining morally significant (Attoe 2023). Such perspectives preserve a relational universe in which the dead are partly present and in which a life may remain unfinished if it fails to reach conditions for ancestral standing.

Mbiti's older formulation remains influential because it recognised that religion in many African contexts was woven into ordinary life rather than enclosed in a separate domain (Mbiti 1969; Olupona 2014). That insight has been repeatedly revised. Critics (notably Okot p'Bitek, who objected to the Christianisation of African religious concepts, and Hountondji, who challenged the ethnophilosophical method itself) have argued that continental generalisations about "African religion" risk reproducing the very unanimism that colonial anthropology projected onto African societies (Hountondji 1983). Wiredu's programme of conceptual decolonisation insists that African philosophical concepts must be examined in their own linguistic and conceptual terms rather than translated uncritically into Western philosophical categories (Wiredu 1996). Any attempt to speak about "African personhood" or "African spirituality" must be willing to interrogate whether the categories being used are indigenous or imposed.

This philosophical terrain matters because colonial Christianity intervened in worlds where personhood was already relational, spiritually charged, and morally developmental. Mission Christianity met a dense ontological field. To recode ancestors as false mediators, possession as demonic, divination as superstition, or misfortune as spiritually irrelevant was to interrupt existing accounts of causation and moral life, and to redistribute dignity. Some forms of mediation became legitimate. Others became shameful, secret, or publicly deniable.

Philosophical retrieval must nonetheless avoid nostalgia. Nwoye is explicit that an African account of personhood need not glorify the past or indulge exceptionalism (Nwoye 2017). African spiritual worlds have never been innocent. They contain hierarchies, exclusions, gendered burdens, fears, and their own possibilities of violence. The aim is to refuse the colonial move by which indigenous categories were denied philosophical seriousness from the outset, while remaining willing to subject them to ethical critique.

5. The Moral Psychology of Religious Coloniality

The move from philosophy to psychology is necessary because colonial religion worked through feeling as much as doctrine. It taught people what to fear, what to confess, what to suspect in themselves, what to seek in prayer, and what to renounce as contamination. Colonial Christianity cultivated new habits of moral attention. The connection between the philosophical claims in the previous section and these psychological transformations runs through the concept of the sacred self. If personhood is constitutively relational and spiritually embedded, then a colonial programme that delegitimises the

spiritual coordinates of that personhood restructures how people feel, interpret, and inhabit their own interiority.

A terminological clarification is warranted. "Moral psychology" as used here does not refer to the Anglo-American philosophical subfield concerned with the cognitive bases of moral judgement. It refers to the historically shaped formation of moral feeling, self-scrutiny, and evaluative habit under conditions of colonial power, closer to phenomenological and critical-theoretical traditions (including Fanon's analysis of the psychoaffective consequences of colonialism) than to experimental research on moral cognition.

Fanon's account is indispensable here because he identified how colonial power penetrates the interior life of the colonised subject. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon described the process by which the colonised person internalises the gaze and categories of the coloniser, producing a form of self-alienation in which one's own body, language, and cultural inheritance become objects of anxiety rather than grounds for habitation (Fanon 1967). When mission Christianity taught African converts that their ancestral practices were demonic, their cosmologies primitive, and their spiritual vocabularies superstitious, it offered something far beyond an alternative theology. It inserted a colonial tribunal into the formation of conscience. The self became answerable to imported norms that judged indigenous interiority as deficiency. The disenchantment genealogy traced in Section 3 sharpens this point: the norms being imported had themselves been produced through centuries of European Christianity's own internal suppression of enchantment. Converts were being measured against a standard that Europe had only recently and incompletely imposed upon itself.

There is, however, a methodological caution. It would be careless to claim a single continental psychology of guilt, shame, or anxiety. Direct evidence for particular emotional transformations is always mediated by region, denomination, class, gender, and historical situation. Colonial Christianity introduced powerful moral grammars of sin, purification, witness, obedience, bodily discipline, and authorised speech. These grammars entered existing worlds of ancestor relation, ritual causality, communal obligation, and spiritual danger. Their coexistence produced layered and sometimes internally divided forms of subjectivity.

Gender was integral to this division. Colonial mission Christianity imposed specific regimes of sexual morality, domesticity, and feminine respectability that reorganised intimate life along European bourgeois lines. The Christian wife, the educated mother, the modest daughter: these figures carried theological and civilisational weight simultaneously. Women's existing spiritual roles as mediums, diviners, and ritual specialists were particularly targeted for suppression or reinterpretation, even as women found new forms of authority within church structures. The gendered dimension of colonial moral psychology was constitutive, shaping how women and men learned to evaluate their desires, duties, and spiritual capacities under imported norms.

Wariboko's account ties Christianity and colonialism to personhood rather than reducing them to ideology (Wariboko 2018). The self becomes answerable to multiple tribunals at once: the church, the family, the ancestors, the state, the clinic, and one's own conscience. Some of these authorities overlap. Others clash. A person may attend church faithfully and still seek ritual protection against envy, misfortune, or malevolent force. Official language often names such coexistence as contradiction while lived experience treats it as necessity.

African psychology provides especially valuable resources for reading this terrain. Nwoye has argued that African psychology, as a discipline, must attend to the spiritual, communal, and cosmological dimensions of human experience that Western psychology has historically marginalised (Nwoye 2015b). In Africentric approaches to diagnosis, Nwoye further argues that certain illnesses are understood as symbolic or extraordinary

events whose hidden meaning must be decoded rather than described phenomenologically alone (Nwoye 2015a). Interpreting suffering may require asking who or what is speaking through it, what relation has broken, and what action is now demanded. From a dominant biomedical perspective, such questions may appear irrational. From within a spiritually relational worldview, they belong to the effort of taking suffering seriously.

The colonial problem emerges when such interpretive habits become publicly delegitimised while remaining privately compelling. A split opens between authorised explanation and lived explanation. That split exceeds the epistemic register. It becomes moral and affective. People learn to narrate themselves in one vocabulary while fearing, grieving, or seeking help through another. The result is a divided legitimacy of experience.

Contemporary Pentecostalism complicates this picture in important ways. Unlike colonial mission Christianity, which often dismissed the indigenous spiritual world as nonexistent or irrelevant, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in Africa has frequently affirmed the reality of spirits, ancestors, and invisible forces, while recategorising them as demonic. Meyer's study of Ewe converts in Ghana demonstrates how Pentecostalism broke with mission Christianity precisely by taking indigenous cosmology seriously, yet reinterpreted it through a framework of spiritual warfare and deliverance (Meyer 1999; Kalu 2008). Her central argument is that, for the Ewe, involvement with modernity goes hand in hand with new enchantment, rather than disenchantment, of the world (Meyer 1999). The image of the Devil, which missionaries communicated through translation, played a crucial role in local appropriation of Christianity, since diabolisation confirmed the existence of local gods and witchcraft. This finding seriously complicates any linear narrative of disenchantment. By translating African spiritual beings as demons, missionaries inadvertently validated the indigenous spiritual world, giving it a Christian name and a Christian ontological status. The very act of condemnation affirmed the reality of what was being condemned. Reclassification did not end with colonialism; the terms shifted, but the contest over what forms of spiritual life are legitimate continues.

6. Manifestations in Lived Experience

6.1. Illness, Misfortune, and Therapeutic Itineraries

Nowhere is this layered subjectivity more visible than in practices of healing. Mental health scholarship across African settings repeatedly shows that people navigate multiple therapeutic worlds rather than moving through care according to the tidy sequences imagined by formal health systems. Burns and Tomita, in a systematic review and meta-analysis, found that approximately half of individuals seeking formal mental health care in published African studies had first consulted traditional or religious healers, with substantial regional variation (Burns and Tomita 2015). Berhe and colleagues' more recent systematic review similarly notes that traditional healers remain widely used for mental healthcare in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly where biomedical services are limited or unaffordable (Berhe et al. 2024). Both reviews carry methodological limitations (heterogeneous study designs, bias toward anglophone contexts, and inconsistent definitions of "traditional healer") but the overall pattern is clear.

These findings are often reported in public health language as matters of pathway inefficiency, delay, or access. Those concerns are valid. Delays in formal treatment can have grave consequences, especially in acute psychiatric presentations. The literature on prayer camps in Ghana, faith-healing centres in Nigeria where patients have been restrained or confined, and instances of abuse in some traditional healing settings is substantial and sobering (Ae-Ngibise et al. 2010; Burns and Tomita 2015; Berhe et al. 2024). Any framework that takes traditional and spiritual healing seriously must simultaneously refuse to romanticise practices that can cause harm. The paper's argument is that the

widespread recourse to spiritual and traditional healers reflects a different phenomenology of suffering, one that cannot be dismissed as ignorance or infrastructure deficit alone.

A framework for thinking about this difference already exists within health scholarship. Engel's biopsychosocial model challenged narrowly biomedical accounts of illness by recognising the interaction of biological, psychological, and social dimensions of suffering (Engel 1977). This was an important advance, and its influence on intercultural health research is well established. However, in many African spiritual contexts, suffering may also be interpreted through ancestral, moral, ritual, and cosmological relations that exceed the standard biopsychosocial frame. Recent work on traditional healing and mental health in sub-Saharan Africa reinforces the need to attend to sociocultural and spiritual dimensions of care (Berhe et al. 2024). The present paper's argument is complementary but distinct. The biopsychosocial model, even in expanded form, is descriptive: it identifies factors that shape illness and wellness. Ontological compression, by contrast, is a critical concept: it names the political and epistemic conditions under which certain explanatory frameworks are authorised while others are delegitimised, suppressed, or confined to the private sphere. The issue is not simply that spiritual dimensions exist alongside biological and psychological ones, but that colonial and postcolonial regimes of legitimacy determine which dimensions count as real and which are treated as error, ignorance, or pathology.

A family faced with sudden or difficult illness may ask why this happened now, what relation has fractured, whether envy, ancestral displeasure, oath-breaking, or social injury has entered the event, and what kind of repair the situation demands. Nwoye's discussion of "symbolic illnesses" clarifies this: some conditions are treated as messages that require interpretation, rather than symptom management alone (Nwoye 2015a). Healing in many African contexts remains irreducibly moral, social, and spiritual. A psychology that cannot register those possibilities will misread experience itself.

Wright and Jayawickrama's discussion of Umunthu in Malawi shows how indigenous philosophies of personhood can strengthen mental health interventions when taken seriously rather than treated as background culture (Wright and Jayawickrama 2021). Their work suggests that decolonising mental health requires rethinking the human subject who is presumed by intervention. It should be noted, however, that this study draws on a single Malawian context, and generalising from Umunthu to "African" personhood carries its own risks, risks that the ethnophilosophy critique discussed above should make evident.

6.2. Ancestors, Death, and Unfinished Belonging

A second manifestation appears in grief, death, and the ongoing presence of the dead. Colonial Christianity introduced powerful teachings about heaven, hell, salvation, and divine mediation. Yet many African philosophical and spiritual traditions conceive death less as absolute departure than as transformed relation. Attoe's discussion of ancestors, disembodied consciousness, and unfinished lives demonstrates how certain African views of death preserve moral and social continuity between the living and the dead (Attoe 2023). The dead may remain active as ancestors, as unsettled presences, or as beings whose moral status depends on the character and completion of the life lived.

Here the disenchantment genealogy is again instructive. Medieval European Christianity had its own robust traditions of ongoing relation with the dead: saints' bodies that healed, tombs that drew pilgrims, relics that bridged heaven and earth (Thomas 1971). The Protestant Reformation severed many of these connections, relocating the dead firmly beyond the reach of the living and replacing relics with scripture. When missionaries later condemned African ancestral practices as pagan survival, they were suppressing in others what their own tradition had already suppressed in itself. The encounter was between two forms of relating to the dead, one still active and the other recently and forcibly abandoned.

This matters for psychology because grief exceeds sadness after loss. It is a reorganisation of relation. In settings where death can leave obligations unfinished, or where premature and violent death is treated as spiritually problematic, mourning may involve ritual work, appeasement, recognition, or reinsertion of the dead into communal memory. A bereaved person may attend a church funeral and still remain troubled by questions the funeral did not answer.

Kiguwa's account of Peterson's work ties writing, personhood, and historical continuity to trauma and healing (Kiguwa 2024). Mourning in African contexts often exceeds private feeling because personhood itself is relational and historical. The living inherit the dead ethically and narratively, beyond biological succession. Colonial Christianity intervened in this inheritance by naming some continuities holy and others illicit. What remains is contested belonging.

6.3. Ontological Compression and the Contested Self

A third manifestation is less visible but equally consequential: the contraction of what kinds of experience can be spoken in legitimate language. Segalo and Cakata argue that indigenous languages are integral to African psychology because language shapes how worlds are known and how humanness is articulated (Segalo and Cakata 2017). To lose linguistic legitimacy is to lose part of one's world-making capacity.

When colonial religion and colonial education establish certain vocabularies as rational and others as backward, subjects learn to edit themselves. They may continue to dream, fear, intuit, or remember within older cosmologies while speaking publicly in church, school, or clinic according to categories that permit only partial translation. This is ontological compression. It is distinct from code-switching, which implies strategic movement between equally available registers. Compression entails a loss of expressive capacity. Parts of the self become unsayable, or sayable only at the price of ridicule, pathologisation, or moral censure. Church testimony, whispered family consultation, ritual speech, idiom, proverb, and dream narration may carry what professional language cannot.

The concept does specific analytical work that terms like syncretism and hybridity cannot accomplish. Syncretism implies a blending of traditions. Hybridity implies productive mixture. Ontological compression names a condition of diminishment: the narrowing of recognised reality under regimes of epistemic inequality. It captures the experience of inhabiting a world richer than one is permitted to publicly articulate, and the psychic cost of sustaining that gap.

The disenchantment genealogy deepens this concept in a specific way. Christianity had already performed ontological compression upon itself during the Reformation. The enchanted world of saints, relics, miracles, and spirit discernment was progressively narrowed into a rationalised theology of individual faith and moral discipline (Thomas 1971; Taylor 2007). When this already-compressed Christianity was then imposed upon African spiritual worlds, a second compression occurred. Converts were required to adopt the vocabulary of a religion that had already thinned out its own spiritual richness, while abandoning practices that were, in structural terms, closer to the Christianity of medieval Chartres than to the Christianity of nineteenth-century Edinburgh. The compression was therefore doubled: Africans were asked to narrow their spiritual worlds into a tradition that had already narrowed its own.

Ratele's reminder that African psychology is a history of subjugated knowledge situates contemporary disciplinary problems within longer histories of dehumanisation and loss (Ratele 2017). Once spiritual vocabularies are downgraded, they do not disappear. They retreat, mutate, reappear, or become audible only in particular spaces. The self does not become modern by adopting Christian or secular terms. It often becomes layered,

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strategic, and split across different publics. To speak one world in the wrong place may invite shame. To suppress it entirely may invite another kind of diminishment. The problem cannot be resolved by celebrating hybridity in the abstract. One must attend to the unequal distribution of legitimacy across the languages in which people are forced to live.

7. Discussion

The argument developed in this paper can now be restated with greater precision. Colonial Christianity in Africa should be understood as a historical reordering of ontology, legitimacy, and moral feeling. It changed what counted as religion, who had authority to interpret suffering, which invisible agencies were sanctioned, how bodies were disciplined along gendered lines, and what forms of subjectivity could appear educated, modern, healed, or saved. Crucially, the Christianity that performed this reordering was itself a product of centuries of internal disenchantment; it arrived in Africa carrying the amnesia of its own enchanted past. It imposed upon African spiritual worlds a compression it had already imposed upon itself. Yet this reordering never fully erased African spiritual worlds. Instead, it produced layered forms of personhood in which Christian, ancestral, communal, therapeutic, and bureaucratic vocabularies continue to coexist, often uneasily.

This conclusion has several implications, though the paper must also acknowledge what it cannot resolve.

First, debates framed as "Christianity versus African Traditional Religion" are philosophically inadequate. They assume two bounded systems confronting one another from the outside. Lived experience is far messier. Wild-Wood's insistence that boundaries are repeatedly crossed in African religious practice is a theoretical correction (Wild-Wood 2025). Persons inhabit worlds through relation, need, fear, memory, and hope.

Second, the disenchantment genealogy transforms how this encounter should be understood. It was not a collision between an enchanted Africa and a disenchanted Europe. It was a collision between an Africa that retained its enchanted world and a Europe whose dominant traditions had recently, forcibly, and incompletely suppressed their own. Recognising this historical amnesia destabilises the colonial claim to spiritual superiority and reveals the encounter as shaped by projection as much as by power. Missionaries condemned what they could no longer acknowledge in themselves. The paper has sought to make this claim with care: it is the dominant missionary traditions, shaped by Calvinist discipline and Enlightenment rationalism, that carried this amnesia most forcefully, even as European Christianity remained internally diverse.

Third, African philosophy and African psychology have more to offer one another than they typically acknowledge. Philosophical accounts of personhood, vitality, and ancestral continuity clarify why distress, grief, and healing in African contexts cannot always be reduced to individual cognition or pathology. Psychological work on language, diagnosis, and narratability shows how these philosophical worlds are lived under conditions of epistemic inequality. Ontological compression, proposed here as a bridge between these disciplines, names the psychic cost of inhabiting a richer world than one's authorised vocabularies can express.

Fourth, the paper points to the limits of romantic nativism and secular dismissal alike. Romantic nativism treats indigenous spirituality as pure resource and forgets its internal hierarchies, fears, and exclusions, including gendered exclusions. Secular dismissal treats it as residue, custom, or superstition, reproducing colonial hierarchies of reason. A decolonial approach must refuse both while remaining willing to subject African spiritual traditions, like any tradition, to ethical and political critique.

Fifth, the analysis has implications for mental health and therapeutic practice. Many experiences of distress are interpreted within moral and spiritual worlds that formal

care cannot afford to ignore. The biopsychosocial model, influential since Engel (1977), represents an important step beyond purely biomedical accounts of illness, and the growing call to extend it to include sociocultural and spiritual dimensions is well taken. The present paper suggests, however, that an expanded descriptive model alone is insufficient. A clinically serious approach in African contexts must also be critically literate: able to recognise when distress is being lived as social fracture, ancestral injury, spiritual attack, moral accusation, or ontological dislocation, and able to interrogate the power relations that determine which explanatory frameworks are treated as legitimate knowledge and which are confined to the margins.

Sixth, Pentecostalism reveals that reclassification did not end with colonialism. Contemporary Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity continues to reorganise the terms through which spiritual life is evaluated, often affirming the reality of the indigenous spiritual world while recasting it as demonic (Meyer 1999; Kalu 2008). Meyer's (1999) finding that this produces new enchantment rather than disenchantment suggests that Africa may be resisting the very trajectory that Europe followed, reclaiming the enchanted dimension that Reformation Christianity suppressed. A more complete treatment would require sustained ethnographic engagement with Pentecostal practice, which exceeds the scope of a review article.

The paper confronts its own limits. The argument is built from theoretical and historiographical sources rather than from ethnographic or clinical data. The experiential claims (about divided legitimacy, moral anxiety, and ontological compression) are inferred from scholarship rather than demonstrated through direct engagement with the people who live these conditions. Future research that brings phenomenological interviews, illness narratives, and clinical ethnography into conversation with this framework would test its claims more rigorously. The paper's continental framing, despite its stated qualifications, also risks underestimating regional, linguistic, and denominational differences. Hountondji's warning against ethnophilosophical unanimism applies to this paper's own claims as much as to those it critiques. The concept of ontological compression, while proposed as a contribution beyond syncretism and hybridity, requires further empirical testing across specific contexts to determine its explanatory limits.

8. Conclusions

This paper has argued that the colonial introduction of Christianity in Africa reshaped far more than formal religious affiliation. It reorganised the conditions of intelligibility through which many African subjects came to interpret personhood, suffering, morality, healing, and the unseen. Mission Christianity reclassified African spiritual worlds, redistributed legitimacy, and entered everyday practices of discipline, education, and gendered self-making. In doing so, it disrupted and redirected how spiritual knowledge was transmitted, remembered, and authorised across generations. Yet it did not produce a clean break with what preceded it. African spiritual and philosophical worlds persisted, adapted, and continued to structure lived experience beneath or alongside official Christian and secular vocabularies.

The paper has further argued that this encounter must be understood within the longer history of Christianity's own disenchantment. The tradition that imposed itself upon African spiritual worlds had already performed a version of this suppression upon itself, stripping out the enchanted practices, healing rituals, and relations with the dead that had characterised European Christianity for over a millennium. The colonial encounter was therefore shaped by a specific historical amnesia, and the ontological compression it produced was doubled: Africans were asked to adopt the vocabulary of a religion that had already narrowed its own spiritual world.

Contemporary religious life in many African contexts is better understood as the ongoing labour of living within layered ontologies under unequal regimes of legitimacy. The sacred self was not eliminated by colonial religion. It was disciplined, renamed, and forced to negotiate new terms of visibility. Ontological compression names what this negotiation costs: the narrowing of the expressible under conditions where parts of the self become publicly unspeakable. Any serious study of African lived experience, whether philosophical, psychological, theological, or clinical, must take indigenous spiritual categories seriously as part of the conceptual life of the present. To do otherwise is to repeat, in more secular language, the earlier colonial mistake of assuming that African worlds become intelligible only once translated into authorised foreign terms.

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