

SECTION

2

HISTORICAL/  
CONTEXTUAL  
BACKGROUNDS OF  
AFRICAN INDIGENOUS  
RELIGION (AIR)



# STUDY OF RELIGIONS, GOD'S CREATION AND HUMANKIND

## Background to the Study of Religion

### Introduction

Since ancient times, human beings have sought answers to life's mysteries, such as who created the universe and everything in it, how evil entered the world, where people go after death, and how this search led to the birth of religion. African indigenous people found answers to these mysteries through their observation of nature and the forces that control it. They passed down their experiences and reflections mainly through oral tradition (spoken sources) and through art and crafts (non-oral sources). However, early scholars of religion have written about the origins and development of religion, providing support for information from both oral and non-oral sources. This section will help you understand the origins and development of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) in Ghana.

### At the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe the historical/contextual backgrounds of the three major religions in Ghana.

### Key Ideas:

- African Indigenous Religion (AIR) is a non-founded religion that originated from the Indigenous Africans' experiences in the world. Their reflection on natural occurrences such as rainfall, sunshine, flood, famine, birth, and death, among others, led to the birth of the religion.
- Priests, kings, queens, cultural heroes and heroines, and opinion leaders contributed significantly to the development of AIR. For example, Okomfo Anokye, Egya Ahor, Togbe Tsali, and many others.
- The absence of sacred literature like the Bible or the Qur'an has contributed to the mistaken idea that Africans have no religion or that it cannot be known. Although Africans do not have written records, their religious beliefs and practices can still be understood and revealed.

# ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION (AIR)

## Origin

It is difficult to trace the origin of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) because it is not a written religion; AIR has no codified scriptures like Christianity or Islam. Its beliefs and practices were passed down orally. The religion has no specific founders or reformers. AIR emerged from African people's reflections on life's mysteries and their responses to these questions (Mbiti).

Indigenous African experiences with natural occurrences like rainfall, sunshine, floods, famine, birth, and death led them to question how these events happened and who was responsible for them. Their desire to avoid harmful events while ensuring more beneficial ones laid the foundation for the beliefs and practices of the indigenous African people. These beliefs and practices form the core of the religion.

Though AIR cannot be traced to a particular founder, Dale R. Bengtson (1975) argues that AIR does have founders. He suggests that an objective study of indigenous African heroes and what their lives represented reveals the existence of founders. Whether AIR has a specific founder like Christianity or Islam, it is still a legitimate religion.

## Development

Although it is challenging to trace the historical development of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) because it is a non-scriptural religion, this should not discourage you from attempting to explore its history and growth. It is indeed possible to trace the development of the first religion on African soil.

The key figures who contributed to the development of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) were powerful kings, priests, and cultural heroes and heroines. Some notable Indigenous Ghanaian religious personalities who shaped the religion in various parts of Ghana include:

1. **Okomfo Anokye and the Asante Indigenous Religion:** Okomfo Anokye, a priest in the Ashanti traditional area, created the Golden Stool of the Asantes, which symbolized both religious and political unity. It is believed the stool, which he commanded from the sky, holds the souls of the Asantes. This symbol of unity plays a significant role in their culture. Anokye also initiated *Adaekese*, a festival to remember past Asante heroes, affirming the influence of indigenous African priests on the development of AIR.
2. **Agya Ahor and the Creation of the Ahobaa Festival:** Agya Ahor was a Fante from Saltpond. After migrating from Techiman, the people of Saltpond faced an epidemic that claimed many lives. Despite efforts to stop it, only Agya Ahor's self-sacrifice ended the epidemic. In his honour, the people of Saltpond celebrate the Ahobaa festival, featuring drumming, dancing, and rituals that commemorate his selflessness.



The second major factor that influenced the development of AIR is historical events. Important occurrences in the lives of Indigenous Africans, including victories or defeats in wars, rainstorms, floods, droughts, hunger, and epidemics, led to the creation of religious institutions, taboos, and rituals. Deliverance from any of these calamities often resulted in rituals dedicated to the deity believed to have provided salvation. Many festivals in Ghana have their roots in such events, such as the battle of Akatamanso, which led to the defeat of the Asantes and the establishment of the Akuapem Odwira and Ada Asafotufiam festivals.

Another factor shaping the development of AIR is the arrival of Islam and Christianity in Africa. Some Islamic and Christian elements have been incorporated into AIR. For example, traditional priests' garments and indigenous army uniforms often feature leather purses with Qur'anic inscriptions, particularly among the Asantes. In northern Ghana, the Catholic rosary and the Muslim tasiba are used as faith objects by some practitioners of AIR.

Moreover, Christian and Islamic teachings, along with the influence of science and technology, have caused the religion to reject certain inhumane traditional practices, such as human sacrifice and female genital mutilation. Outdated cultural practices have also been abandoned.

However, Christianity and Islam have negatively impacted AIR by reducing the reverential fear of the sacred that once upheld a high moral standard. The portrayal of God as a merciful father in these religions has led to a decline in the fear that promoted moral uprightness. Both Christianity and Islam, being missionary religions, have influenced many practitioners of AIR to abandon their traditional practices. Some shrines have been deserted, and objects of traditional worship destroyed.

As a result, many practitioners now turn to Christianity or Islam for comfort during crises, leading some to convert while others maintain a dual allegiance. Consequently, the number of AIR practitioners is declining, while the followers of Christianity and Islam continue to grow.

### Activity 2.1

Visit the internet and search for information about the contextual background of African Indigenous Religion (AIR). Use the following links to guide your research:

- <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-traditional-religions>
- <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/>
- <https://blog.oup.com/2014/05/15-facts-on-african-religions/>

Take notes on key points such as the origin, beliefs, and practices of AIR. Summarise your findings in one page, highlighting how AIR has evolved over time. Ensure you include relevant information from reliable online sources.

### Activity 2.2

1. Visit a local site of historical significance related to the origin and development of African Indigenous Religion (AIR). This could be a museum, a monument, a chief's palace and other similar places of historical importance. During your visit, observe the environment carefully, paying attention to any artifacts, symbols, or stories that reveal insights into the history and cultural practices of AIR.
2. Capture your experience through photographs and drawings and take detailed notes on what you observe. Make sure to document key features that relate to the beliefs and practices of AIR, such as traditional items, monuments, or oral histories shared during your visit.
3. Afterwards, take some time to reflect on your experience. Write a one-page report that addresses the following:
  - How did the visit deepen your understanding of the origins and development of AIR?
  - What emotions did the experience evoke in you? Were there any aspects of the visit that particularly impressed or surprised you?
  - Did the visit change or reinforce your views on the history of AIR? Why or why not?

This reflection is an opportunity to connect what you saw with what you've learned, allowing you to express your thoughts on the significance of AIR in shaping African history and culture.

### Activity 2.3

Choose one of the key figures in the development of African Indigenous Religion (AIR), such as Okomfo Anokye and the Asante indigenous religion or Agya Ahor and the creation of the Ahobaa festival. Using this figure as inspiration, create a drama to tell their story and their role in shaping AIR.

Choose one of the following formats:

- **Song:** Compose a song that highlights the achievements and significance of the chosen figure in relation to the development of AIR. Your song should include key events and contributions they made to their community and religion.
- **Poem:** Write a poem that captures the essence of the figure's role in the development of AIR. The poem should reflect their impact on their people's religious beliefs and cultural practices.
- **Short Drama:** Script a short drama that tells the story of the chosen figure. Act out the key moments in their life, such as Okomfo Anokye

conjuring the golden stool from the sky or Agya Ahor's self-sacrifice to save his people. Use dialogue and action to bring their story to life.

After completing your piece, share it with your class or group. Focus on making your presentation engaging and informative, showcasing how these figures influenced the development of AIR and their communities.

## Sources of Information to the Study AIR

You have already learned from previous lessons that African Indigenous Religion (AIR) is a non-scriptural religion. The absence of sacred texts like the Bible or Qur'an has led some to mistakenly believe that Africans have no religion. However, their religious beliefs and practices can still be known and understood. There are two main sources for the study of AIR: oral sources (oral tradition) and non-oral sources.

### Oral Sources (Oral Tradition)

The word "tradition" refers to what has been passed down from one generation to the next (McGRATH E. Alister, 2001). Oral tradition, or oral sources, consist of information that is mainly preserved in the memory of the religion's practitioners and passed on through speech or song across generations. Some examples of oral sources include:

- **Myths:** These are ancient stories about gods, ancestors, spirits, heroes, heroines, ethics, and morals. For instance, there are myths about creation, the origin of ritual worship, customs and taboos, what happens after death, and historical events that led to the establishment of festivals. Myths also highlight the qualities of cultural heroes and heroines.

### The Ewe Myth on Creation

God (Mawu) created everything in the world. Before Mawu's creation, the earth was empty, shapeless, and dark. After creating the earth, Mawu made human beings from clay and water. The soul was given to humans to provide life and act as a guardian spirit. After death, the soul returns to Mawu to receive either a reward or punishment based on one's life on earth.

As time went on, Mawu could no longer create new humans due to a shortage of clay. Therefore, He used the bodies of the dead to make new ones, ensuring that children would resemble their parents.

The Ewes believe that Mawu moved up into the sky because of human disturbances. After His departure, He sent His eldest son, Lisa, with a sword to clear the forest and make tools. Mawu then used these tools to divide the world among His sons. One son was given control over the sky, thunder, and lightning, another over all creatures, while others were assigned control over specific animals, birds, and trees.

- **Proverbs:** Proverbs are wise sayings that teach moral truths. While many proverbs are passed down orally, some are expressed non-verbally through creative designs

on cloth, calabashes, and walls. Proverbs teach AIR practitioners about the nature of God, gods, ancestors, humans, and the relationships between these beings.

- **Names:** Names provide valuable insights into the AIR practitioners' understanding of their relationship with God, gods, ancestors, and spirits. Many names reflect the attributes of God or reveal a person's character, often linked to the circumstances of their birth or the creation of their community (Mbiti, 1969).
- **Traditional Prayers and Songs:** A close study of African indigenous prayers and songs offers an understanding of the practitioners' concept of God, their moral code, and their belief in the world of the living and the dead.

You can follow this <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQ3G0kBxZOQ> to watch a video of traditional music that conveys information about AIR.

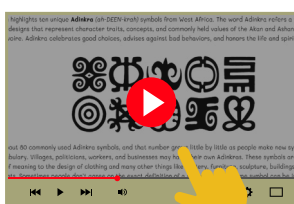
## Non-Oral Sources

Non-oral sources are man-made objects that express the beliefs and practices of AIR through creative art, design, or craftsmanship. These sources include:

- **Wood carvings:** Stools, linguist staffs, and carved images of deities.
- **Metal carvings:** Deities engraved on rings, anklets, necklaces, and bracelets.
- **Pottery:** Clay images of deities.
- **Inscriptions:** Found on walls.
- **Paintings:** Found on graves, homes, and palaces.
- **Designs:** Seen on calabashes and stones.
- **Body art:** Tattoos, facial marks, hairstyles, and body paintings.

These non-oral sources play a significant role in conveying the beliefs and practices of AIR in physical and visual forms.

Click the link to watch a video on some religious designs on drums:



## Activity 2.4

Below are some key books that will help you learn more about the history and traditions of African Indigenous Religion (AIR):

- Gyekye, K. (1996). *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd edition). Heinemann.
- Opoku, K. A. (1978). *West African Traditional Religion*. FEP International Private Limited.

You may select a passage from one of these books, or your teacher may assign a specific text for you to read. As you engage with the material, focus on understanding what the text is communicating about the history and traditions of AIR.

**Now follow the instructions below to complete this activity.**

1. **Read the texts:** Select a passage from one of the books or use the text assigned by your teacher. Focus on the main points and arguments presented in the passage. What key beliefs or ideas are being discussed? What examples or evidence does the author provide to support their views?
2. **Analyse the arguments:** Reflect on how convincing the examples or evidence are. Are they based on historical facts, cultural practices, or oral traditions? How reliable do you find these sources of information?
3. **Prepare a report:** Once you have read the passage, summarise the main points in your own words. Be ready to share your understanding with the class. Consider how this text adds to your knowledge of AIR and its traditions.
4. **Reflection:** Think about how the text has influenced your view of AIR. Did it confirm what you already knew, or did it introduce new concepts? How does it compare with other sources you have studied?

Text	
Page/chapter reference	
Key concepts	
<b>Supporting Evidence</b>	
<b>Extension task:</b> How reliable or credible is this source of information?	



### Activity 2.5

Your teacher may invite an expert on the history and development of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) and its key sources of information to share their knowledge in class. This could be a linguist, historian, or someone deeply familiar with AIR practices.

#### Instructions:

1. Create a list of thoughtful and engaging questions to ask the expert. Consider asking about the origins of AIR, the role of myths and proverbs, or how oral traditions have shaped our understanding of AIR today. You could also inquire about the importance of artefacts and other non-oral sources in preserving AIR.
2. During the class session, ask your questions and carefully note down the answers. If a class interview is not possible, try to find someone knowledgeable outside of school, such as a local elder, religious practitioner, or a cultural historian, and interview them instead.
3. After the discussion or interview, reflect on what you learned. How did the expert's knowledge enhance your understanding of AIR? Did their answers challenge or support what you already knew?
4. Write a brief report on the key points from the interview or discussion and be ready to share them with your class.

### Activity 2.6

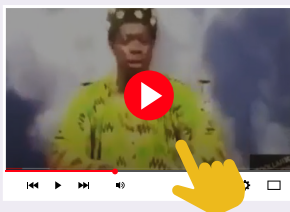
Consider the different oral sources of information on the history of African Indigenous Religion (AIR). Your teacher may assign you specific sources to explore, such as:

#### 1. Proverbs:

- Worepɛ asɛm aka akyerɛ Onyame a, woka kyerɛ mframa (*Messages to God can be channelled through the wind*) – Twi proverb
- Nyakopɔn hyɛ wo nsa koraa ma, na ɔdasanyi ka gu a, Ɔhyia wo do bio (*If God gives you drink and man pours it away, He replaces it for you*) – Fante Proverb
- Bosom a ɔpɛsɛ ɔne wo tena ne ɔkyerɛ wo n'akyiwadɛɛ (*If a god tells you what it hates, it means, it wants to stay with you*) – Bono proverb
- Giwa ba ta da cizo hannun nan a ke tsoro (*Elephants do not bite, it is their trunk that people are afraid of*) – Hausa proverb
- Sisa kpakpa ta atsiɔ yɛ sane gbaa mli (*It is only a good ancestor whose name comes up in a conversation*) – Ga proverb

## 2. Songs:

- Follow these links to videos of traditional music that convey information about AIR.



## 3. Myths: The Ewe Myth of Creation

Pick one from each category and summarise what it tells you about the history and development of AIR.

Type of source	What does this tell us?	How do we know?

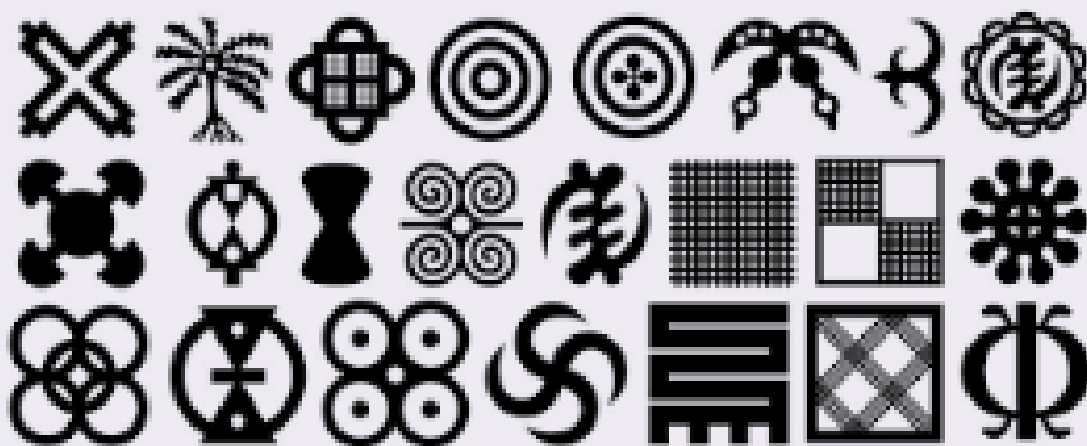
### Activity 2.7

Create a piece of art or a poster showcasing non-oral sources of information about AIR. Use the following steps:

1. Choose non-oral sources to feature, such as wood carvings, pottery, or body art.
2. Design a poster that includes images of these sources. You can draw, paint, or use digital tools to create your design.
3. Write a brief description of each source on your poster, explaining its significance and what it reveals about AIR.
4. Display your poster in the classroom or share it with your peers to show what you have learned about non-oral sources of AIR.

### Activity 2.8

Investigate various non-oral sources of information about the history of AIR. Your teacher might give you specific sources to study, but here are some examples to get you started:



<https://drummingupcharacter.com/what-is-adinkra/>



Source: <https://www.proxibid.com>





# Review Question

1. Describe the origin and development of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) in your community and write a one-page report.

## Extended Reading

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQ3G0kBxZOO>
2. <https://drummingupcharacter.com/what-is-adinkra/>
3. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/african-traditional-religions>
4. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/>
5. <https://blog.oup.com/2014/05/15-facts-on-african-religions/>
6. Holmes McDougall (1966). Religions of the world, School Study Bible Services (book 7th), Holmes McDougall Ltd, 30 Royal terrace, Edinburgh.

## Acknowledgements



Ghana Education  
Service (GES)



## List of Contributors

Name	Institution
Kyei Addai Daniel	Fumbisi SHS, Upper East Region
Emmelia Sablah	Pope John SHS, Koforidua
Clement Nsorwineh Atigah	Tamale SHS, Tamale
Ali Richard	St. Francis Girls, Jirapa
Abdul-Rahaman Abdul-Wahab	Gambaga Girls SHS
Joseph Abass	Okuapeman SHS, Akropong