

When religious scholars examine the Christian Eucharist they tend to focus on the feelings and beliefs of the head of practitioners: what Christians believe about the Eucharist. Rarely do religious scholars focus their examination on the experience of the physical acts of the rituals themselves. This underdeveloped discipline is largely due to the misunderstanding of embodied practices in religion. This essay will discuss embodiment as the basis for what African religions as well as offer an epistemological shift that needs to occur to understand African religions and other religions based on embodiment in our world . I have undertaken this topic inspired by my interest in dance and the continent, Africa, as well as my search for a better understanding of how scholars understand embodiment. It is important to note that many of my sources discuss the importance of dance and embodied practices in contexts of African religions. As a dancer, I think these can be made into generalizations to many embodied-centric religions.

To reframe the way in which religion is defined in our world , it is necessary to have an understanding of how religion is widely understood today. Largely, religion is understood via the framework of the World Religions Paradigm. This paradigm claims that religion is interior and individual experience manifests and is expressed in terms of belief. With this perspective, rituals, scriptures, communal/institutional social formations, symbols, myths, etc. are used to deepen beliefs. The WRP frames beliefs, actions, experience, etc. in terms of a binary with secular belief, actions, experience, etc.

Through its structure, the WRP supports the ideas purported by Western Philosophy of idealism, empiricism and dualism. Through idealism, Plato claimed that our knowledge was grounded in a transcendent realm of ideas and our bodies were just prisons that ensnared us. While, Aristotle, through empiricism argued that our bodies were the base for getting to higher forms of knowledge. These former ideas are the basis in which Rene Descartes forms his idea

that mental-phenomena are non-physical, more simply that the mind and body are distinct and separable. All of these Western philosophers valorize the world perspective of logocentrism, assuming that knowledge is something that exists in our minds that can be disassociated from our embodied self.

Situating the world perspective of embodiment in religious studies has been a challenge. In a field dominated by the perspective that the term 'religion' denotes a bunch of individuals with internal beliefs, it has been historically challenging to acknowledge that other religious groups may experience religiosity via outward motion of the body in groups. It has been ever harder for many to accept these religious practices as valid. This has caused uneducated and ethnocentric claims to be made about African religions, such as suggesting these religions are non-human or 'evil.' But rather, for religions with their foundation in movement and embodiment, groups find and express their feelings through movement. Professor of dance and Afro-American studies at Smith college, Yvonne Daniel, explained the importance of dance (and overall movement) in meaning making. She says in her book *Dancing Wisdom*: "Dance and music communicate through multiple sensory channels and thereby contain, symbolize, and emit many levels of meaning. The search for meaning reaches from the visions of the creators and intentions of the performers to the content and context of the performance, to the participants or audience members, and usually to the entire social community..."

To understand the importance of embodied practices in knowing the world, seeing is better than hearing. I will therefore introduce you to the Kpelle people of Liberia in West Africa. The Kpelle people are slash and burn rice farmers They perform a variety of music in ritual settings, including singing, dancing and playing instruments. These activities are used to communicate with intermediate spirits who stand between humans and the high god, Yala. Dr.

Ruth Stone, Professor of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at University of Indiana found that the Kpelle's embodied religious practices can be seen in the ordinary. She said: "Everyday Kpelle performance is fascinating in its intricate joining of religious and secular, for its playing with ideas from both realms without strictly segregating one from another" (Stone, 395). Stone's quote reveals a key aspect of embodiment and therefore African religions that does not align with the WRP, the separation between secular religious. As can be seen in the example above, the Kpelle do not separate their life out into sections of the day, "this part religious and this part not." Rather the Kpelle imbue supernatural meaning into their everyday life.

A more explicit example of embodiment in African religiosity can be seen through the Kpelle's dance and music rituals. As I said above, much of Africa's religiosity is expressed through dance. Often after a day of rice farming, Kpelle villagers will hold music performances. These performances will start with a preparation of the village and the dancing arena and then to solo dances in a community circle. The dance welcomes certain spirits, tutelary, that are able to control humans and create sounds and movements. According to a number of Kpelle a quality performance depends upon the aid of the supernatural and vice versa: the finer the performance, the more likely the spirits are a part of the performance. "Basic Kpelle beliefs indicate that true excellence in the arts derives from the supernatural realm. No really fine singer or drummer is outstanding by simply relying on his or her efforts. Each of these masters engages in a relationship with a tutelary spirit in order to attain excellence. Thus the very foundation of artistic performance rests on a religious basis" (Stone, 397). Stone's passage above is telling of the importance of dance for the Kpelle for connection with the divine. But, if one looks further they can see that Stone is going farther than stating that African religions' medium to reach the divine is embodied practices. In the example of the Kpelle and other African religious groups,

Stone and many other scholars assert that dance is religion, more sophisticatedly, these embodied practices are religion. This take on the definition of religion clashes with the WRP. Here, beliefs are not produced from individuals, nor are they produced from the mind, but rather bodies moving in space in community.

Instead of trying to understand African religions within the scope of the WRP, Dr. Yolanda Covington-Ward, professor of Africana Studies and Anthropology at Pittsburgh University, suggests a shift in epistemologies. As I discussed above, approaching embodied religion with an underlying epistemology of dualism leads to degradation and oppression of these studies. Covington-Ward suggests we ditch the epistemology that underlies the theory of dualism. Rather she poses the basic epistemological idea that bodies are involved in our ways of knowing. This epistemological shift focuses on the body as a self-learning tool as well as its role in producing relationality and intersubjectivity (with both earthly beings and non-earthly beings). Scholars call this embodied or “sensory” epistemologies or of knowing bodies.

This epistemological shift is hard to embody as many epistemological shifts are. Once again, it is easier to visualize this change in understanding the world rather than just hearing it. Think back again to a Christian kneeling down at an altar in a huge church. This Christian is kneeling beneath a priest with their hands cupped, eyes closed and head down. Right next to this individual is another individual doing the same actions. What are these bodies organized in space telling about the Christian ritual of Eucharist? Most religious scholars ignore the messages from these bodies, but they are telling us a lot about the ritual and the practitioners. From my perspective, I see a religion that supports individuality in thought and action. I see a religion that focuses on escaping the present.

There is a lot to takeaway from this paper. If only one thing is gained, I hope that it is the importance of bodies in understanding how people interpret the world around them.

## Bibliography

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