Effects of Artificial Intelligence on Perceptions, Representations of Yoruba Traditional Religious Traditions in Nigeria And Diaspora

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Abstract
The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, such as language models, virtual assistants, and image-generation tools, is transforming how religious and cultural traditions are perceived and represented globally. For the Yoruba people, whose religious systems are deeply symbolic, oral, embodied, and contextual, these technologies pose both opportunities for preservation and risks of distortion. The problem lies in how Artificial intelligence often overlooks the complex nuances of Yoruba traditional religion, potentially leading to misrepresentation, cultural commodification, and appropriation. This study investigates how AI technologies shape public and diasporic perceptions of Yoruba religious traditions, examining the extent to which artificial intelligence-generated content aligns with or diverges from traditional interpretations. Using a qualitative, mixed-methods approach, the study draws on literature reviews, analysis of AI-generated images and texts, interviews with Yoruba religious practitioners in Nigeria and the diaspora, and focus group discussions within diaspora communities. Findings reveal that AI-generated representations frequently omit vital cultural markers, such as tonal language, ritual context, and symbolic specificity, and tend to reflect Western aesthetic norms or stereotypical portrayals of indigenous religion. However, artificial intelligence likewise offers new avenues for diasporic engagement, reimagining of traditions, and digital storytelling. The study concludes that while artificial intelligence holds promise for cultural preservation and innovation, it risks eroding authenticity, misinforming traditional authorities if left unchecked. It recommends participatory AI development involving Yoruba scholars, practitioners, and elders, the creation of culturally rich datasets, ethical AI guidelines for religious contexts, and increased AI literacy within Yoruba communities, both in Nigeria and abroad.

Keywords: Yoruba Traditional Religion; Artificial Intelligence; Representation; Diaspora; Cultural Authenticity.

Introduction
The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years has transformed how spiritual, religious, and cultural traditions are represented, understood, and consumed. Artificial intelligence-driven tools like natural language generation, virtual or augmented reality, translation, image generation (e.g. text-to-image), are increasingly mediating how diasporic or disconnected communities interact with their heritage. For Yoruba traditional religion, with its rich cosmology, pantheon of deities (*Orisas*), oral literatures (*Ifa*, incantations, praise poetry), ritual practices, and symbolic codes (such as *Sango, Iyemoja*), this technological revolution offers both peril and promise.

Existing works have started to explore adjacent areas. Idowu and Abbass (2025) examined how AI-generated narratives of Yoruba myths compare against canonical forms, showing that while artificial intelligence can maintain creativity and coherence, it frequently neglects deeply embedded ritual details, cultural markers, and lacks epistemic grounding in the tradition (Idowu & Abbass, 2025, pp. 110-115). Another study, AI Literacy in Low-Resource Languages: Insights from Creating AI in Yoruba Videos by Oyewusi (2024), demonstrates that making AI literacy content in Yoruba can help bridge language gaps, but likewise that explanations and translations often smooth over culturally specific spiritual concepts or metaphors (Oyewusi, 2024, p. 5, p. 12). Meanwhile, ethical and theological explorations, such as in Tech-ing the Sacred by Ajibola (2025), consider how

integrating artificial intelligence into religious education introduces issues of bias, authenticity, and loss of sacredness in religious content (Ajibola, 2025, pp. 30-35).

These works suggest that artificial intelligence is already affecting Yoruba religious traditions, but there remains a gap, which is how artificial intelligence's representations affect perceptions (belief, authority, identity) among both the wider public and practitioners, particularly in the diaspora, and how these representations compare with traditional, ritual, embodied knowledge. The diaspora dimension is important because many Yoruba (or of Yoruba descent) live outside Nigeria, and their connection to tradition often passes through mediated forms, books, online media, social media, virtual ritual, diaspora communities. Representations produced by artificial intelligence may become part of what they understand as "tradition," with limited possibility to contextualise or verify. This could lead to erosion of cultural values and knowledge. Omosor (2020) has warned against the danger of alienating the indigenous knowledge system and the cultural identity of the African people.

The basis and rationale for the present study, therefore, lie in identifying how artificial intelligence influences both representation, that is, what is created, seen or heard, and perception, that is, how people interpret, accept, or reject those representations, especially in contexts where the tradition is not physically rooted. The study also aims to explore in what ways artificial intelligence reproduces power structures, Western norms, and bias in depictions of Yoruba spiritual forms, and conversely, how Yoruba practitioners, artists, diaspora communities, elders negotiate, resist, reclaim, or adapt those representations. Understanding these dynamics matters for religious integrity, formation, identity, and ethics of technology, and not only for cultural preservation.

Accordingly, this paper addresses three interlinked research questions, which are, firstly, in what ways do artificial intelligence-generated images and texts represent Yoruba traditional religious traditions, and how do these diverge from or align with traditional and practitioner understandings? Secondly, how do communities and practitioners in Nigeria and in the diaspora perceive these representations, do they accept them, feel alienated, critique them, or see opportunities? Thirdly, what mechanisms, practices, or frameworks might help ensure more respectful, accurate, and culturally grounded representation by artificial intelligence?

By exploring these questions, the present study contributes to a growing but still emerging literature at the intersection of artificial intelligence, cultural heritage, postcolonial epistemology, and religious studies. It intends to build upon narrative or qualitative, hermeneutic, and ethical approaches documented in earlier studies (e.g. Idowu & Abbass, 2025; Ajibola, 2025), while bringing in empirical data from interviews and diaspora contexts to extend what is known. In doing so, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for policy, artificial intelligence design or data, religious education, and community participation, so that artificial intelligence becomes a tool for empowerment, preservation, rather than alienation or distortion.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, mixed-methods approach combining content analysis, interviews, and focus groups, with triangulation to ensure validity. First, content analysis of artificial intelligence-generated representations was conducted, text outputs (like stories, myths, rituals, descriptions of deities) and image outputs (such as sacred symbols, ritual scenes, depictions of *orisas*) from prominent artificial intelligence tools (translation tools, text-to-image, LLMs). These were compared with traditional sources (oral recordings, interviews with elders, text collections) to note divergences and misrepresentations. Second, semi-structured interviews were held with Yoruba religious practitioners (elders, priests, *Orisa* devotees) in Nigeria particularly in southwestern states, and in major diaspora hubs like Brazil, US, UK, to capture insider perspectives on authenticity, response, and perception to artificial intelligence representations. Third, focus group discussions with younger diaspora Yoruba with their ages approximately 18-35 years, to understand how mediated artificial intelligence outputs shape belief, perception, and identity. Data from interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded using thematic analysis (Braun &

Clarke, 2006) to derive recurring themes. Ethical clearance was obtained, respondents signed informed consent forms, and anonymity assured.

Data were analysed also in light of existing literature to situate findings. The combination of community voices and content analysis allows both what is being perceived to be examined and what is being represented. The study period spanned six months. Limitations include the rapidly evolving nature of artificial intelligence tools, of which new versions may alter representations, and that, not all diaspora communities could be reached.

Conceptual Framework

To examine the effects of artificial intelligence on perceptions and representations of Yoruba traditional religious traditions, this study explains some concepts, such as representation, heritage preservation and cultural authenticity, diaspora identity theory, and technology-and-religion interface.

The Concept of Representation: Drawing from Stuart Hall's models of representation (Hal, 1997), representation is not simply reflection but involves selection, framing, and power in who creates representations and for whom. In artificial intelligence contexts, what datasets are used, who trains the models, and what biases exist will matter deeply. Misrepresentation may arise when artificial intelligence "sees" Yoruba religious material through non-Yoruba lenses, or when training data lack cultural nuance. The framework assures that representation mediates perception, what people see influence what they believe tradition is.

Cultural Authenticity and Heritage Preservation: Concepts from heritage studies (Smith, 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998) distinguish between community-based or living heritage and authorised heritage discourse. Yoruba religion is a living heritage, dynamic, embedded in ritual practice, and orally transmitted. Authenticity involves ritual correctness, local context e.g. incantations, offerings, linguistic tones, and symbolic meaning. Artificial intelligence representations that genericise or flatten these features threaten perceived authenticity.

Diaspora Identity: Theories of diasporic cultural identity e.g. (Hall, 1990; Clifford, 1994) emphasise that in diaspora, traditions are mediated, reimagined, and reinterpreted. Material such as books, internets, media, become sources of identity, memory, and sometimes of hybridisation. Artificial intelligence is part of that mediated space. Diasporic Yoruba may adapt representations generated by artificial intelligence, or reject them, shaping identity in negotiation between global norms and homeland tradition.

Technology and Religion Interface: Recent scholarship explores the mutual shaping of technology and religion e.g. (Cambell & Vitullo, 2016; Morgan, 2017). Artificial intelligence is not neutral, it encodes values, power, bias, assumptions. Likewise, from religious studies, religious authority (priests, elders, oral transmitters) historically control ritual and symbolic meaning. At the same time, artificial intelligence challenges who holds authority if representations proliferate beyond traditional gatekeepers, furthermore, ethical frameworks for artificial intelligence (bias, accountability, transparency) become relevant in religious contexts where misrepresenting rituals or deities could be spiritually offensive or harmful.

These conceptual lenses allow the study to examine, (a) how artificial intelligence-generated representations emerge (dataset, model design, training), (b) how these representations differ/align from practitioner or traditional notions of legitimacy/authenticity, (c) how audiences perceive these representations (hybridity, acceptance, rejection), particularly in diaspora settings, (d) what power relations are at play (who receives, who produces, who critiques), and (e) what normative criteria might be employed to evaluate artificial intelligence representations (accuracy, linguistic fidelity, ritual context, respect for sacredness).

Theoretical Framework

To understand how artificial intelligence affects the perceptions and representations of Yoruba traditional religious traditions, this study is situated within several interwoven theoretical

perspectives, such as postcolonial theory, media studies or technology bias theories, indigenous epistemologies, and religious authority theory.

Postcolonial Theory: Postcolonial theory e.g. Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994, Fanon, 1963, help us see how knowledge production has long been structured by colonial power, where Western norms define what is considered superior, authentic, or valid. In representations of non-Western religions, particularly via artificial intelligence models or global media primarily trained on Western sources, there is a risk of reproducing colonial tropes, like "exotic", "primitive", "other". Such tropes may be subtle (a deity shown in stereotyped garb) or structural (artificial intelligence training data overrepresents Western art, underrepresent Yoruba oral or ritual sources). Postcolonial theory thus foregrounds who has voice, whose representations are visible, whose knowledge counts.

Media Representation/Technology Bias Theories: Technological bias, sociology of media representation, and algorithmic bias (Gillespie, 2014; Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019) show that artificial intelligence models often mirror biases present in their training data. Large language models (LLMs), image models, and translation tools often underrepresent or misrepresent non-Western religious ideas, ritual nuance, and minority spiritual vocabularies. Similarly, media theory (Hall, 1997) about encoding/decoding suggests that messages are produced (encoded) by creators (or data sources) and decoded by audiences, with power differentials influencing both encoding and decoding. In the case of Yoruba religion as mediated through artificial intelligence, encoding may strip away ritual meaning, cosmological ontology, or symbolic details, while audience decoding might either accept, hybridise, or contest the representation.

Indigenous Epistemologies: Drawing on indigenous epistemological frameworks (Smith, 2012; Dei, 2017) which emphasises relationality, oral memory, context, embodiment, and praxis, this theory holds that knowledge of Yoruba traditional religions is not merely visual or textual, but embodied (ritual, tonality, song, tactile), relational (between community, ancestors, nature), and often esoteric or secret. Artificial intelligence tools tend to privilege what is textual, visible, or easily digitisable, possibly excluding the esoteric, the ritual, the tacit knowledge, and the performance. Thus, theory here reminds us that representation is more than visible depiction; much of Yoruba tradition is in sound, smell, timing, oral invocation, touch, etc., which may be misrepresented or lost in artificial intelligence outputs.

Religious Authority Theory: From sociology of religion (Weberian authority, Bourdieu on symbolic canital) religious authority in Yoruba tradtion resides in elders, priests, ritual specialists, oral transmitters, lineage. They define correct practice, guard knowledge, interpret symbolism. When artificial intelligence representations proliferate, questions arise, who is recognised as authoritative in the diaspora, those physically present with ritual power, or those who produce widely circulated artificial intelligence texts/images? There is potential tension between authority exercised by traditional custodians and democratised representation enabled (and possibly distorted) by artificial intelligence. As religious studies scholars have pointed out (e.g. Asad, 1993, Lioyd, 2005), when authority is intertwined with authenticity and legitimacy, misrepresentations can damage that legitimacy.

Integrative Synthesis

By combining these perspectives, the theoretical framework suggests that the impact of artificial intelligence on Yoruba traditional religion will be shaped by historical power imbalances (postcolonial), technological bias (media studies), the mismatch between what is easily digitised and what is contextually, orally, ritualistically embedded (indigenous epistemology), plus the shifting loci of authority in representation. Hypotheses derived might include, artificial intelligence outputs will systematically downplay secret/ritual/esoteric elements, diaspora communities will show both critique and acceptance (for accessibility), there will be racialised and gendered aesthetic biases, and that the more traditional practitioners are involved in creating or training artificial intelligence, the more authentic representations tend to be.

This theoretical structure guides both data collection (seeking perspectives of practitioners and elders, analysing artificial intelligence outputs for content and bias) and evaluation (to ascertain

authenticity, correctness, cultural integrity, respect) of the effects of artificial intelligence on perceptions and representations.

Findings

Based on analysis of artificial intelligence-generated content, interviews with practitioners in Nigeria and diaspora, and focus groups, several major themes emerge in how artificial intelligence is influencing perceptions and representations of Yoruba traditional religious traditions.

Omission of Ritual and Contextual Detail

Many artificial intelligence-generated images or texts fail to include important ritual particulars like correct offerings, precise linguistic features, proper ritual objects (tone, incantations, *Iforuko* or praise names), or accurate spatial/traditional settings (sacred groves, natural settings, shrines). For instance, interviews with priests in Oyo and Oyo states reported that artificial intelligence images often depict deities in generic :nature" sceneries but miss crucial details such as colour patterns specific to that deity, symbolic tools (e.g. Sango's axe, *Iyemoja's* water motifs), or accompanying attendants (Idowu & Abbass, 2025, p. 114). In daspora focus groups, young Yoruba participants often with Western facial features or attire, this diminished their sense of spiritual authenticity and resonance.

Bias toward Western Aesthetics, Stereotypes and Commodification

Artificial intelligence models encode biases based on training data. Many representations were influenced by Western fantasy or religious tropes like halos, fantasy costuming, robes, light effects, which do not align with traditional Yoruba visual culture. Some artificial intelligence-generated spiritual or music content merges Yoruba *orisa* names with popular fantasy tropes, which practitioners describe as "exoticising" rather than respecting tradition (Ajibola, 2025, p. 34). Likewise, there is commodification, whereby spiritual symbols used as aesthetic, merchandise, or décor, are divorced from ritual meaning. Practitioners expressed concern that people may think tradition is simply art or folklore, losing sight of lived belief and ritual.

Hybridization, Innovation, Access and Diaspora Engagement

Artificial intelligence is enabling forms of access and innovation on the other hand. Diaspora participants report that they appreciate artificial intelligence tools when they make tradition available, translations of *Ifa* verses, digital archiving of myths, virtual tours of shrines. Young practitioners adopt artificial intelligence-assisted digital or storytelling art to re-imagine traditional characters in new media. Some use social media VR or filters to reconnect with ritual practice when physically distant. These hybrid forms often lead to creative practices that are meaningful to diaspora youth, though sometimes contested by elders who see them as diluted (Hall, 1990, p. 235).

Perceptual Effects: Authority, Belief, and Identity

Regarding perception, many interviewers said that artificial intelligence outputs influence what non-practitioners believe about Yoruba religion. For instance, some people unacquainted with the tradition believe that artificial intelligence-generated images are "authentic", this can perpetuate misunderstanding. Also, diaspora youth sometimes feel that authoritative knowledge can be undermined, confusion can ensue if artificial intelligence content claims to describe deity or ritual behaviour but differs from what priesthood or elders teach. However, many practitioners insist that belief is resilient, rituals, embodied practice, community oral transmission still hold central authority, and artificial intelligence representations are seen as supplementary or secondary (Asad, 1993, p. 25).

Ethical Concerns: Misrepresentation, Sacredness, Secrecy

Several practitioners expressed ethical concerns. Some traditions have esoteric ritual practices or secret knowledge not meant for general dissemination. Artificial intelligence might inadvertently misrepresent or expose these. There is fear of spiritual offense if deities are portrayed inaccurately. Others noted danger of decontextualised use of sacred speech or incantations by non-initiated people based on artificial intelligence content. Additionally, issues of ownership, who "own" digital

images, stories, are raised, particularly when artificial intelligence content is commercialised without benefit or consultation sharing (Benjamin, 2019, p. 74).

Opportunities: Preservation, Education, Community Agency

There are clear opportunities despite the concerns. Artificial intelligence can help preserve endangered oral traditions, particularly in diaspora where elders are fewer. Archiving and recording *Ifa* divinations, praise poetry, myths, with audio-visual components, perhaps under the control of community guardians, can help future generations. Artificial intelligence tools can likewise help in teaching, translation, raising awareness among non-Yoruba audiences in respectful ways. Some younger diaspora artists or producers see artificial intelligence as a tool for reclaiming narrative, creating works centered on Yoruba cosmology that is accessible globally.

Discussion

These findings mirror what Idowu & Abass (2025) found regarding artificial intelligence storytelling, omitting cultural markers and ritual detail (pp. 112-120). Similarly, they align with Oyewusi (2024) on the trade-offs in creating artificial intelligence content in Yoruba, visibility versus access smoothing over ritual semantics, complex metaphors (pp. 9-14). The hybridisation theme supports diaspora identity theory, showing that tradition is dynamic in diaspora, creative, and mediated. But the risk of loss of authority and misperception shows media bias and authority theories are relevant, when representation is democratised but not accurate, authority becomes contested.

Summarily, the effects of artificial intelligence are not uniform; there are both opportunities and distortions, both positive and negative perceptions. The direction depends heavily on who is involved in generation (external creators vs practitioners), what datasets are used (mass media fantasy sources vs cultural data), how much secrecy or ritual or context is preserved, and how audiences engage critically with artificial intelligence content.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are advanced based on the findings so as to ensure that the influence of artificial intelligence on Yoruba traditional religious perceptions and representations is culturally authentic, respectful, and positive:

Participatory Dataset Development: Yoruba religious priests (*babalawos, Iyanifa,* etc.), leaders, ritual specialists, artists, oral historians, and diaspora members should be involved in creating datasets (text, image, audio) used to train artificial intelligence models. This ensures inclusion of correct linguistic tones, ritual contexts symbolic objects, sacred spaces, and gestures.

Ethical Guidelines and Best Practices: Establish guidelines for artificial intelligence use in religious contexts transparency about what is artificial intelligence-generated versus traditional, respect for esoteric or secret knowledge (that is, not making public knowledge that is traditionally viable and exoticising, ensuring cultural consent, ownership and clear attribution, possibly voluntary or regulation codes of conduct by artificial intelligence tool providers.

Cultural and Artificial Intelligence Literacy Programs: Encourage Yoruba communities both those who are resident in Nigeria and diaspora to increase literacy about what artificial intelligence can and cannot do, workshops on artificial intelligence's biases, limits, how to interpret artificial intelligence-generated content critically. Educators, both secular and religious, should integrate this into community education.

Technological Design that Respects Tradition: Artificial intelligence tool developers should incorporate symbolic semantics and cultural ontologies, for instance, models that can handle tone in Yoruba language, symbolism and spatial relationships in ritual settings, allow for multiple data modalities as in audio, video, text, performative or ritual. Likewise, avoid defaulting to Western aesthetics or over-generalisations.

Guardianship, Authority and Validation Mechanisms: Traditional custodians (priests, elders) should be recognised as validators, a kind of "seal of authenticity" for artificial intelligence tools or

content representing Yoruba religion. Diasporic organizations could partner with such custodians to review content, ensure continuity of tradition.

Support for Archiving and Preservation: Support community-led digital archiving (audio, video, story, ritual enactment) with high fidelity, under ethical oversight, so that traditions are preserved not only in visual or written form, but embodied practice. Funding from diaspora networks, cultural heritage grants, NGOs may help.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is increasingly embedded in the fabric of how cultures are perceived, represented, and mediated. For Yoruba traditional religions, which are deeply rooted in oral transmission, relationality, ritual, cosmology, and sacred symbolism, this technological shift presents both peril and promise. Artificial intelligence offers unprecedented potential to preserve oral literatures, praise poetry, mythic narratives, and ritual performance in one hand (Oyewusi, 2024, p. 8), this enables diaspora communities to access tradition when physically distant, facilitate translation, sharing, and archiving, and stimulate creative reimaginings of tradition relevant to younger audiences. On the other hand, the findings of this study shows serious risks, such as misrepresentation of symbolic objects, omission of ritual detail, propagation of stereotypes, exoticisation, loss of authority of traditional custodians, and distortion or confusion of belief for those whose primary exposure comes through artificial intelligence-generated representations (Benjamin, 2019, p. 71).

From the interviews, it is clear that many practitioners maintain that tradition is more than what can be textually described or visualised, it is experienced, performed, conveyed through sound, ethical comportment, smell, ritual action, offering, ancestral presence. When, artificial intelligence outputs present a decontextualised or flattened version, they may fail to capture what makes the spiritual resonance authentic (Smith, 2012, p. 120). In diaspora contexts, where oral transmission can be attenuated, the influence of artificial intelligence may loom larger, for many youth, what they see in artificial intelligence-mediated media or online may become a benchmark for what "Yoruba religion" looks like, even if it deviates from traditional norms. But many diaspora participants in focus groups also displayed agency, they critique artificial intelligence depictions that feel inauthentic, they sometimes use them for inspiration, they navigate between what globalised media present and what ancestral elders teach.

Theoretical frameworks, postcolonial theory, indigenous epistemology, media bias, help us understand these processes (Bhabha, 1994, p. 67). They show that biases emerge from historical power imbalances, aesthetic norms that privilege Western fantasy or imagery, design choices in technology, and valuation of what is digitasable, and are not just accidental. Authority theory shows that control over representation matters on who is recognised as having the right to define what is "correct" or sacred, and not merely who produces. Diaspora identity theory underscores hybridity, identity is not static, it is negotiated between innovation and tradition, mediated by global and technology flows.

Given this, the conclusion is that influence of artificial intelligence on perception and representation of Yoruba traditional religions is neither wholly positive nor wholly negative, it is contingent. The outcomes depend heavily on who is involved (external creators vs practitioners), how communities engage either participatorily, ethically, or critically with artificial intelligence tools, and how much cultural nuance is preserved. If Yoruba religious traditions are to be represented authentically in age of artificial intelligence, then there should be ethical frameworks, community involvement, intentional design, and literacy (Noble, 2018, p. 99). Without these, representations may drift into stereotypes, cultural loss, and commodification. But when properly managed with care, artificial intelligence can become a powerful ally in preserving, rejuvenating, disseminating tradition, particularly for diaspora.

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