

## Article

# Sharpening the Identities of African Churches in Eastern Christianity: A Comparison of Entanglements between Religion and Ethnicity

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**Abstract:** Although at first sight Eastern Christianity is not associated with Africa, the African continent has shaped the establishment and development of three of the four main Eastern Christian traditions. Through a sociological lens, we examine the identity of the above African churches, focusing on the socio-historical entanglements of their religious and ethnic features. Firstly, we study the identity of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the Eritrean Orthodox Church belonging to Oriental Orthodoxy. We focus on these African churches—and their diasporas in Western countries—as indigenous Christian paths in Africa. Secondly, we examine the identity of Africans and African-Americans within Eastern Orthodoxy. We consider both to have some inculturation issues within the Patriarchate of Alexandria and the development of an African-American component within Orthodoxy in the USA. Thirdly, we analyze the recent establishment and identity formation of African churches belonging to Eastern-rite Catholic Churches. In short, we aim to elaborate an overview of the multiple identities of African churches and one ecclesial community in Eastern Christianity, and to compare diverse sociological entanglements between religious and ethnic traits within them. A fruitful but neglected research subject, these churches' identities appear to be reciprocally shaped by their own Eastern Christian tradition and ethnic heritage.

**Keywords:** African Christianity; Eastern Christianity; Eastern-rite Catholic Churches; Eastern Orthodoxy; identity; Oriental Orthodoxy; religion and ethnicity



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## 1. Introduction

Although at first sight Eastern Christianity is not associated with Africa, this Christian branch has actually had and currently has a role in the lives of many Africans and African-Americans. In fact, the African continent has shaped the establishment and the development of three of the four main traditions of this branch of Christianity. Approaching this broad research topic through a sociological lens, we study the identities of the above African churches, focusing on the entanglements of their religious and ethnic traits. In other words, we briefly examine the social history of these churches for shedding light on the interplays between their own Eastern Christian tradition and ethnic heritage into the shaping of their identities.

Section 2 provides a sociological framework in order to comprehend this rare but significant research topic. It builds a theoretical perspective for sharpening the African churches' identities and their related religious–ethnic linkages within Eastern Christianity. After Section 3 presenting the research methodology, Section 4 explores the cases of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria (COC), the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EthOC), and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (ErOC) belonging to Oriental Orthodoxy. We study them as indigenous Christian paths in Africa, also concentrating on the main challenges faced by their diasporas in Western countries (Section 5). In Section 6, as regards the Eastern Orthodox tradition, we detect the identity and some inculturation issues of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria located in Egypt, which has canonical responsibility for the entire African continent. Meanwhile, in Section 7, we analyze the encounter between

African-Americans and Eastern Orthodoxy in North America throughout the twentieth century. In this respect, we emphasize the development of an African-American identity group into Eastern Orthodoxy in the USA. In Section 8, we provide an outlook on the establishment and identity formation of African churches within the Eastern-rite Catholic churches, these being among the ones most recently created in this Christian tradition.

In conclusion, the article offers an overview of the multiple identities of African churches in Eastern Christianity through the development of an engaging sociological dialogue on the African milieu and peoples in Eastern Christianity. In this effort, we compare diverse entanglements between religious and ethnic features within the identities of the above African churches. As occurred more broadly for African Christianity (Kamaara 2010), the religion-ethnic linkage has historically embodied an identity realm for competition, alliance, and conflict among these churches and ecclesial groups. Bridging this unsettled situation to Émile Durkheim's (1982) established perspective, throughout the article the identities of African churches in Eastern Christianity will emerge foremost as collective social representations of self and other(s) into particular countries/regions' histories. Grounded on the Durkheim's conception of religion, these shared identities matured through systems of practices and beliefs centered on sacred things and holy symbols, which are socially enhanced by the ancestral images of related ethnic representations.

## 2. Christian Religion(s) and Africa: Approaching the Eastern Milieu

Recent studies have suggested new questions and topics with which to approach African Christianity. In particular, they range from the legacies of missionary and colonial experiences to the development of local African religious initiatives and the explosion of their communities abroad (Bongmba 2016; Van Klinken 2015). Against this varied backdrop, the study of Eastern Christianity makes it possible to examine a fresh combination of these research themes related to the African continent and peoples. When referring to Eastern Christianity, one should mean the group of Christian churches established in the area of the former Roman Empire of the East. Historically, indeed, the term Eastern Church was employed for the Greek Church based in Byzantium as opposed to the (Western) Latin Church based in Rome. The terms Eastern and Western had their origin with the geographical divisions of Christianity, expressing both the cultural separation between the Hellenistic East and the Latin West and the political split (395 A.D.) between the Western and Eastern Roman empires (Parry 2010). Until the East-West Schism in 1054, which was caused by ecclesial as well as economic and political reasons condensed into a dispute over the authority of the Bishop of Rome, Eastern Christianity was in communion with the Western Church. Then, the terms Eastern—or more broadly that of Orthodox related to the Christian East—and Western have been used in contrast to highlight ecclesial differences and to construct diverse church identities.

The term Orthodox derives from the Greek words *orthos*, which means 'right', and *doxa* that means 'belief'. Therefore, the word Orthodox means 'correct belief' or 'right thinking' (McGuckin 2008). From the historical perspective, this branch of Christianity developed teachings and liturgies different from those of the Latin tradition of Christian churches in Western countries. In fact, Orthodoxy claims to practice the original Christian faith as transmitted by the true tradition established by Jesus Christ. In this regard, the double meaning of the Greek word *doxa*, which also means 'glory' or 'glorification', reveals the belief of Orthodoxy that it practices the original forms of Christian worship. As mentioned above, Eastern Christianity does not pertain a single communion or denomination, but rather a universe of Christian churches within four main religious traditions. These latter are the communion of the Eastern Orthodox churches, the communion of the Oriental Orthodox churches (Non-Chalcedonian), the Eastern-rite Catholic churches, and the denominations descended from the Church of the East. As stated in the Introduction, the African continent has shaped the establishment and the development of the first three of the Eastern Christian traditions (Eastern Orthodoxy; Oriental Orthodoxy; Eastern-rite Catholicism). Approximately, these latter traditions account for 49–51 millions of African believers.

Some scholars use the term African Christianities (Kollman 2010) in order to underline the diversity of Christian communities in the continent, while others prefer to emphasize this plurality within a composite idea of African Christianity (Bongmba 2016). In our article, which focuses solely on a specific branch of Christianity, we prefer to argue about African churches and in one case an ecclesial community in Eastern Christianity. Each of them, in fact, is associated with a distinct historical experience in the African milieu, and forms a specific identity in the Eastern Christian domain. In this sense, the Eastern Christian component has engendered an authentic feature or original traits in the identity of each of these African religious communities. To gain a better understanding of their identity through a social historical account, we should follow three intersected research perspectives, of which the previous two help to texture the third leading one.

Firstly, African Christianity has always had an international dimension. On the one hand, Christianity in Africa was partly founded by European and American missionaries, and some churches retain significant missionary connections. On the other hand, from the beginning of the slave trade, African Christianity comprised a broad movement of African people across the world. In accordance with this scenario, sociologists of religion have explored topics such as the patterns of expansion of African churches beyond national borders, and the formation of Africans' identities abroad (Adogame and Spickard 2010; Adogame 2013). In this regard, several scholars have examined the transnational growth of African Christian diasporas, focusing especially on the Pentecostal tradition and the Charismatic movement<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, in what follows we address a neglected theme in the literature and pay attention to the African diasporas in the Eastern Christian traditions.

Secondly, the religious field in the African continent is still dealing with multiple processes of decolonization. According to a nuanced view, by this term is meant the divesting of African religious thinking from influences of the colonial past. We are not assuming a rejection of the colonial ancestry, but rather the understanding of certain African religious features in harmony with their ancient nature (Wiredu 1998). For instance, within the study of Christianity there are still several generalizations about African beliefs in God which are associated with Western Christian thinking. As regards to Eastern Christians in Africa, some sociologists have considered their beliefs according to the native context, especially in the most explored cases of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Van Doorn-Harder and Vogt 2012; Binns 2016). However, this pattern should be more widely extended to all the churches within the Eastern Christian branch, also focusing on their current identity challenges related to decolonization processes.

In regard to this last point, probably the most serious consequence of colonial rule and racial domination was the re-emergence of a quest for identity in the African realm. This situation became more evident after the decolonization period (1950–1975), when confessional identities assumed an increasing space in the political life of several continents' countries (P'Bitek 2011). Thus, the enhanced role and influence of the two main primordial forces into African continent appeared, namely *religion* and *ethnicity* (Mazrui 2001; McCauley 2014). As we will demonstrate throughout the article, a full-length consideration concerning this last issue, i.e., that of the sociological topic of religion–ethnicity entanglements, appears crucial for interpreting the formation of diverse African identities in the Eastern Christian traditions and their condition as a driving force (Oppong 2013). In fact, different religious–ethnic associations have caused manifold competitions, alliances and frictions in the African Christian field, as well as contemporary paths of interreligious conflict (Haynes 2007).

Grounding this last insight on a sociological perspective, we adopt the consolidated approach proposed by Harold Abramson (1980) on the subject, which has been later implemented in other research (Hammond and Warner 1993; Numrich 2010; Kivisto 2014). He conceived four types of religion–ethnicity entanglements in order to explore the variability of their identity linkages. On this basis, by employing a comparative perspective we will demonstrate how the identity of above African churches has been shaped according to their own Eastern Christian tradition and ethnic heritage (for instance about Orthodox

diasporas, see [Guglielmi 2020](#)). In the first type of linkage, religion works as the “major foundation” of ethnicity. Among the most noted examples of “ethnic fusion”, one may consider Jews and Amish ([Abramson 1980](#), p. 869). Abramson appears to recognize in this identity combination a sense of ethnicity inextricably embedded in a distinctive religion. In the second type, “a particular ethnic group may be grounded in a relatively unique religion, but one that has a more marked association with a distinct territory or homeland, a particular language, or an evolving sense of nationality” ([Abramson 1980](#), p. 870). For instance, the most cited examples of “ethnic religion” can comprise the Dutch Reformed, the Church of England and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

Following Abramson’s perspective, the third type of religion–ethnicity relationship is the most diffused one. It concerns a situation in which diverse ethnic groups share a common religious tradition. This type of “religious ethnicity” may especially include immigrant religious groups, such as Germans who re-shaped American Lutheranism, or the Italians and Poles who were major components of Roman Catholicism in the USA ([Abramson 1980](#), p. 870). The final type of entanglement is considered by Abramson as the least widespread one. In this case, religion has a small or not significant role in the definition of an ethnic identity. One of the examples of this “ethnic autonomy” could concern the gypsy and Romany groups, as well as American Indians. However, as in the case of the previous three types of religion–ethnicity entanglement, the latter is conceived to offer a broad vision of a societal identity at a particular time. They should therefore be understood as key indications that are not necessarily mutually exclusive and are potentially subject to minor overlaps.

### 3. Methodology

This study aims to furnish a detailed overview of the multiple identities of African churches in Eastern Christianity, and to compare diverse sociological entanglements between religious and ethnic traits within their identities. According to this two-fold objective, research works and investigations in sociology and social history focusing on the aforementioned churches will be considered. More specifically, each section will build a brief social historical account of one or more of African churches, thus delving their sociological identities. With that regard, the study does not use the theological scholarship or address the doctrinal debates that various churches have nurtured<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the study only mentions the differentiation and rapprochement experienced among Orthodox churches through their theological discourses along the last centuries, i.e., not linking theology with our enquiry of the African realm and Eastern Christianity.

### 4. Oriental Orthodoxy and Africa

Oriental Orthodoxy is the second biggest tradition of whole Eastern Christianity. It operates as a communion of six autocephalous churches, in which the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria holds the role of *primus inter pares* or ‘first among equals’. This communion has recognized the first three ecumenical councils (those of Nicaea (325 A.D.), Ephesus (341 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.)), but it does not accept the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.), since this latter excommunicate it ([Parry 2010](#)). Beyond the more common knowledge arguing that Oriental churches rejected the Chalcedonian theology stating that Jesus Christ “has two natures in one person, being God and Man”, they separated from the Eastern Church for different reasons related to linguistic issues and political influences ([Chaillot 2019](#)). After the bilateral dialogue between Eastern Orthodox churches and Oriental Orthodox churches (1990, 1993), they all agreed that both Orthodox traditions share the same basic theological assumptions and interpretations.

#### 4.1. The Coptic Orthodox Church

The COC is based in Egypt and currently has its headquarters in Cairo. According to historical tradition, it was founded by the Apostle and Evangelist Saint Mark in the middle of the 1st century, and it was the subject of many prophecies in the Old Testament. Due

to the aforementioned theological disputes, it split from the rest of Christendom after the Council of Chalcedon. During the fourth and seventh centuries, the COC progressively expanded its jurisdiction over African territories and kingdoms (such as the Aksumite Empire and the Nubian kingdoms), being aligned with Roman/Byzantine sovereignty. Between 639 and 646 A.D., however, Egypt was conquered by Islamic forces from Arabia. Thus, it became ruled by the Rashidun Caliphate. In this situation, the political and religious stances towards Christians ranged from coexistence to heavy aggressions and persecutions. From the 12th century, the Copts became a religious minority, and Islam supplanted Christianity in several territories (Kamil 2002).

In line with this historical backdrop, the COC's heritage based on the Egyptian origin from the time of Pharaohs is a vital component of its identity. As stated by Janet A. Timbie (2007, p. 94), the ethnic feature of the Coptic population is rooted in the same name of its religion:

'Copt' and its adjective 'Coptic' developed from Greek *Aigyptos/Aigyptios* (Egypt/Egyptian). This became Arabic *Qibt*; thus, English 'Copt'. It would then be correct to say that all Egyptians are Copts—and this has been said by various people in modern times for political purposes—but common understanding defines Copt as 'Egyptian Christian'. As Arabic replaced Coptic in daily life and the majority of Egyptians became Muslim, labelling Egyptian Christians as Copts or Coptic Christians followed.

The Coptic language is the liturgical language adopted by the COC, and it derived from ancient Egyptian—which was banned at the time by the Arab conquerors—combined with Greek letters. In fact, historians recorded witness to extensive Coptic translation activity from the fourth century (Timbie 2007, p. 103), since translations of the Bible from Greek to Coptic were quite diffused. In this sense, Coptic may be framed as the last stage of the old Egyptian language. With that respect, the purpose of many Coptic practices and habits still followed today (from hymns to garments and food) is to express an historical and cultural continuity with the early Christians of the Nile (Cannuyer 2001). For instance, the COC still retains the same form of the calendar developed in the pharaonic period, which includes 12 months of 30 days and one short month of five or six days at the end of the year. Moreover, the Coptic music, which is a characteristic part of COC's worship, maintains elements of Pharaonic and Greco-Roman music with a later influence from the synagogue and the Syrian Church (Timbie 2007, pp. 111–13).

On examining this religious–ethnic heritage, we may consider two further distinctive features of this indigenous path of Christianity in North Africa, which contributed to the formation of COC's identity. Firstly, the School of Alexandria is the oldest Christian catechetical school in the world. It was established by Saint Mark in around 190 A.D. for religious learning and theological studies, and played a driving role in the history of Christendom with its notable writers and teachers such as Origin and Clement. Secondly, the Desert Fathers concerns the Egyptian Christian monks who started to live in the desert during the 3rd century, working and praying in thousands of cells and caves. This Egyptian establishment of ascetic practice marked the beginning of the monastic movement in the whole of Christianity, and it was founded by such leading figures as Anthony the Great and Saint Paul of Thebes.

During the 19th century, the Coptic Orthodox Church experienced a period of stability, as well as tolerance towards its faithful by the majority religion. In that century, the Coptic Pope Cyril IV (mandate 1816–1861) founded the first modern Coptic schools, created a printing press, and re-established the School of Alexandria in 1893. Currently, this institution has colleges in Alexandria and Cairo, and other theological schools have been established outside Egypt. Indeed, since the following century, Coptic diasporas spread to all continents and settled in major Western countries (Van Doorn-Harder and Vogt 2012).

In March 2012, during a period marked by institutional change as well as religious conflicts in Egypt, the Coptic Pope Shenouda III (1923–2012) died due to illness while he was trying to promote social reconciliation in the country. In November of the same year,



Bishop Tawadros (1952–) was chosen as the 118th Coptic Pope, and he had to deal with the same challenges for religious tolerance as his predecessor. The last phase of the COC's history has indeed occurred amid both political repression and religious fundamentalism in the country. In this regard, international human rights organizations have reported increasing intolerance and violence against Coptic Christians, as well as the failure by the Egyptian government to protect religious minorities.

Against this historical background and according to a sociological perspective (Abramson 1980), within the Coptic identity religion seems to serve as the “major foundation” of ethnicity. It appears that being an Egyptian (of the origin) coincides with a sense of ethnic peoplehood rooted in the Coptic religion. In other terms, the goal of the Copts seems the maintenance of a religious identity merged with their ancestral milieu, which competes with the majority of the Arab Muslim identity and the still existing Greek one (Clarysse 2019). This type of religion–ethnicity entanglement is termed “ethnic fusion” because the religious identity is blended with the ethnic one (Kivisto 2007, pp. 493, 495). Not by accident, especially in the early twentieth century, the Coptic identity formation was subsumed through the political ideology of “Pharaonism” (Van Der Vliet 2010). As reminded by Randall P. Henderson (2005, pp. 161–62) regarding the COC's conservation of the ancient Coptic identity:

The attempt to reintroduce the Coptic language as the official liturgical language and hymns as a window to the past, and thus to the true ‘modern’ identity of the Copts, seems to have been effective. If one visits the official website of the Coptic Orthodox Christian Church on the internet there are Coptic hymns for free downloading, high-speed connections to hear the liturgy being spoken, and even international Coptic hymn contests asking the next generation to write their own hymns, in Coptic, of course. The artwork remains both an immediate link to divinity as well as a reminder of the many peoples who have left their influence and culture in Egypt's history. Likewise, the architecture remains a witness to an earlier time in which many left the ‘corruption’ of the larger world in preference for the wilderness of the Egyptian desert. Their preservation is perhaps a reminder to us that we will always need the desert.

In short, sharpening the identity of the COC, it appears as its language, cultural habits, religious practices as well as distinctive historical features (i.e., the School of Alexandria and the Desert Fathers) generate(d) an unification of ethnic and religious traits (Gregorius 1982). This blending is even more entangled through the tragic experiences of martyrdom lived throughout the centuries as a Christian group which became a minority after its territory was violated. As the Egyptian scholar Sana S. Hasan writes: “To this day the two main Coptic traditions remain monasticism and martyrdom” (Hasan 2003, pp. 105–6).

#### 4.2. *The Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches*

From the historical perspective, the second oldest Oriental Orthodox jurisdiction is established in Ethiopia. As argued by Christine Chaillot (2012), indeed, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is the most ancient church in Black Africa. It was founded in the middle of the fourth century, as Ethiopian tradition attributes the introduction of Christianity in the country to the Apostle Philip. The king of Aksum, a town in the northern area of present-day Ethiopia, adopted Christianity as the official religion of his kingdom, and the Patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius, ordained father Frumentius (early fourth century 383 A.D.) from Lebanon as the first bishop of Ethiopia. In order to valorize the non-Chalcedonian view, the word *tewahedo* in the name of the Ethiopian (and Eritrean) church(es) means ‘made one’, thus emphasizing the unity of the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Until 1959, the year in which the EthOC obtained the autocephaly, i.e., the canonical independence, all bishops were Egyptian clerics belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Despite this lengthy journey towards autocephaly, the EthOC should be examined as an authentic socio-cultural and religious entity rooted in the history of its country.

According to Calvin Shenk (1998) and John Binns (2016), in fact, the EthOC embodies an indigenous Christian path in Black Africa. Since the fourth century, it has developed important aspects of early Christian and Hebrew cultures as well as some facets of a primal religion. As regards to the Hebrew culture, throughout the church history various groups have sought to associate themselves with the prestige of “Israelite ancestry”, that is, descendants of biblical figures, most notably King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Kaplan 2009). In this respect, the EthOC still adopts some Jewish practices such as circumcision, dietary laws, and the observance of Sabbath on Saturday. On the other hand, according to the different Ethiopian regions, this church held some beliefs and symbols present in various traditional African religions (Berhane-Selassie and Müller 2015). In this context, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has preserved an oral tradition within its theological education, which is a quite unique feature in the whole Christian religion (Binns 2005). This oral education includes hymnody, music, poetry, dance, as well as theological teachings; and it establishes an EthOC’s own educational approach that challenges the more modern ones.

As stated by Ephraim Isaac (2012), Ethiopia is an extraordinary symbol of continuity amid a turbulent and sometimes crisis-ridden context. In a few decades, it passed from colonialism to democracy, to ever-accelerating involvement in the international institutions and organizations. Indeed, Ethiopia’s history over the last century was extremely controversial, as well as characterized by several political regimes, which also changed the state’s relations with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In this regard, now listed are the most evident of these political changes, with the focus on the basic features of their church-state relations: during the Italian occupation (1936–1941) the EthOC was persecuted and many Ethiopian priests joined the anti-colonial resistance; after the British military intervention, throughout the last Ethiopian empire (1941–1974) the EthOC became the state religion of the country; in the periods of the communist military junta (1974–1987) and the socialist republic (1987–1991), the government nationalized several church properties and persecuted the Patriarch Theophilos (1910–1979) as well as other clerics; in the era of democratic regimes (1992-present), the EthOC remains the main Christian denomination in the country. Currently, the EthOC is the leading religious and socio-cultural institution in an African country marked by an increasing economic development, and it is an influential voice in the Ethiopian public sphere. Unfortunately, since November 2020 a grave armed conflict is occurring in the Tigray region, which is located in the north of Ethiopia (RULAC 2022). Based on political struggles towards the Tigray’s ethnic minority, this war has already caused thousands of deaths and is generating serious political and economic instability throughout Ethiopia.

The situation of the EthOC appears to be different from that of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church for a number of reasons. The early attempts to establish a separate Eritrean church occurred solely in 1920s. In the 1950s, when the EthOC obtained canonical independence, the ErOC became simply a division of the EthOC. Nevertheless, the historical development of the Eritrean context seems even more conflictual than the Ethiopian one (Ansel et al. 2014). According to a historical view, after thirty years of armed conflict (1961–1991), Eritreans voted for the independence of their country through a referendum in April 1993 (for other details, see Section 5). In this unprecedented situation, the bishops ordained by the EthOC fled from Eritrea, thus creating chances for the development of additional Eritrean Orthodox bonds with the Coptic Orthodox Church. In this contentious scenario, the Coptic Pope Shenouda III consecrated in Cairo in 1991 two bishops for the Eritrean Orthodox migrants in London and in the USA. With a rather unusual arrangement, the first two Eritrean Orthodox bishops were assigned to the diaspora.

In July 1993, the Eritrean president applied overt political pressure on Egypt for the promotion of the ErOC’s autocephaly. In June 1994, the Coptic pope consecrated five new Eritrean bishops, who established the first Eritrean Orthodox holy synod. In the same year, the Coptic church recognized the canonical independence of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. Bishop Philipos (1901–2002) was consecrated as the first Patriarch of Eritrea in May 1998 in Cairo, and twenty days later his enthronement was held in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea.

This ecclesial development fostered further tensions within Ethiopia–Eritrea relations. Furthermore, it affected the relationships between Egypt and Ethiopia and between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the EthOC. Already during the armed conflict, in fact, Egypt had expressed acceptance of greater autonomy for Eritrea. Since the 1990s, however, the ErOC has been subject to pressures by the state and social surveillance by the government. The Eritrean regime values neither civil society nor religions, and has instituted a regime of severe state control. More recently, it has also participated in the armed conflict in the Tigray region on the side of the Ethiopian government.

On examining two crucial characteristics of these indigenous Christian paths in Black Africa, which contributed to the construction of the religion–ethnic entanglement inside its identity, we may primarily refer to the historical trajectories of the Ethiopian Orthodox monasticism and to the ethnic plurality of Ethiopian/Eritrean (predominantly Orthodox) milieu. Historically, if in the Coptic Orthodox Church the monastic movement has been a unifying identity vehicle as well as a current common religious–ethnic symbol, the ancient Ethiopian monastic movement engaged into contentions between church and kingdom, fostering an ethnic diversification as the most important carrier of local identities:

The greatest influence of monasticism appears to have come hundreds of years later when a series of monastic movements arose in the period between the mid-thirteenth and mid-fifteenth century. During this period, the ‘Solomonic’ kings expanded the border of their kingdom through conquest and reduced previously autonomous regions to vassal status. As the anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff have noted, it is precisely under these conditions that ethnic identities are formed and strengthened. In the case of Ethiopia, local monastic clergy played a vital role in this process.

It was Shawa province which first came under Solomonic domination, and it is here that we first witness an important development in Church history: the rise of militant regionally based anti-royal monastic movements. Shawan clerics associated with the monastery of Dabra Asbo (later renamed Dabra Libanos) refused gifts from the emperor, denounced royal marital practices, and denied the right of the kings to intervene in the internal affairs of monasteries. These monks, many of whom were sons of regional rulers displaced by the expansion of the Christian kingdom, resisted the emperor’s growing power not on the battlefield, but by attempting to preserve the Church’s autonomy on the local level. Although the rebel Shawan clergy were eventually subdued, when the emperors exiled their opponents and rewarded their supporters, other movements were not so easily subdued (Kaplan 2009, pp. 298–99).

Throughout Ethiopian history, there were various waves of monastic movements, which challenged the relationship of the church with the temporal power; also articulating a distinctive group identity associated the high status of “Israelite descent”. As argued by Steven Kaplan (2009, p. 292), this important historical process is related to the fact that generally the Ethiopian character refers to a more recent national label rather than to a specifically ethnic identity:

Because Ethiopia was not conquered during the initial Muslim conquest of North Africa and the Middle East, Ethiopian Christians were not reduced to the status of a religious/ethnic minority in a manner similar to the Copts or Syrians. Nor did they spend long historical periods under foreign rule, as was the case with the Armenians. Rather, they remained until the last decades of the twentieth century the ruling elite and primary carriers of Ethiopia’s national traditions. Thus when we speak of ethnicity in Ethiopian history, we usually refer to groups (to mention only a few) such as the Amhara, Tigreans, Oromo, Somali, Gurage, and Beta Israel. Only in the context of the Ethiopian diaspora, which has flourished since 1974, are ‘Ethiopians’ an ethnic minority, rather than a ruling national group.



From a religious point of view, we have to consider not only the above-mentioned interreligious influences inside the EthOC and ErOC, but also the relevant religious minorities settled in the Ethiopian/Eritrean territories. From 615 A.D., a group of Arab followers of Islam in danger of persecution refuge in the empire of Aksum, encountering the tolerant attitude of the Ethiopians. Both religious groups have had their phases of violent hostility and political struggles, but especially in the last three centuries have developed a practical everyday co-existence and co-operation (Abbink 1998). As suggest by Jon Abbink (1998, pp. 119–20), moreover, within our sharpening the religious and ethnic traits of Ethiopian/Eritrean people, we need to stress the several customs and traditions which may be founded across defined ethnic groups—be they of Christian, Muslim or traditional African religion. In particular, they may be detected in the blend of primal rituals and practices concerning magical practices, initiation, spirit possession and certain (not all) divination methods; as well in the importance of (past) saints and holy men venerated through interreligious pilgrimages to their tombs.

According to this historical background and following a sociological perspective (Abramson 1980), in both cases of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Eritrean Orthodox Church may be recognized some main ethnic groups associated to a specific religion, which have a strong relation with a modern nationality. This type of religion–ethnicity linkage is termed an “ethnic religion” because the association between religious and ethnic identity is more historically circumstantial than in the type of entanglement analyzed in the Copts (Kivisto 2007, p. 494). In the two aforementioned African churches, the identity of a world-wide religion such as Oriental Orthodoxy reinforces the main ethnic identities of Ethiopian and Eritrean populations. Although the Ethiopian and Eritrean churches foster a concentric synthesis of religion, ethnicity, and race focusing on the embodiment of a Black African identity, this process of fusion is not monolithic, as happened instead with the Coptic Orthodox Church. In fact, Ethiopia is historically marked by a significant religious plurality and ethnic diversity (Abbink 1998), as “at the end of the nineteenth century the Church was instrumental in unifying the kingdom and its dependencies around a common Christian identity” (Ancel and Ficquet 2015, p. 63).

Broadly speaking in terms of numerical percentage, we should mention that Orthodox Christians today represent about half of the Ethiopian and Eritrean populations, probably boasting a greater presence in the second country. They are not a religious minority merging ethnic and religious traits, representing rather the main religion in the country but not the monopolistic one. Finally, in the last few decades political actors use this religion–ethnicity entanglement and its identity in order to pursue their electoral interests through religious nationalism or to promote processes of nation building. The consolidation of two different national identities has shaped indeed a societal fracture within the historical religious–ethnic linkage, generating an irremediable and progressive division between the two Ethiopian and Eritrean lands and churches.

## 5. The Oriental Orthodox Diasporas in Western Countries

Since the last century, political uncertainty and socio-economic inequalities have fostered large-scale emigration flows from Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, the Coptic diaspora has increased significantly since the 1950s, mainly due to the difficult socio-economic situation and religious discrimination in the homeland. However, Egyptian communities had also been present abroad in the previous centuries. Currently, the largest Coptic diasporic groups are settled in North America, Western Europe and Australia; their estimated sizes vary from one to two million people. There are many Coptic archdioceses and dioceses in the Western European countries, as well as three dioceses in the United Kingdom, which operate through recently built churches and monasteries. North America has the largest estimated Coptic presence in the West, since established there is a Coptic archdiocese in the USA (in which serve twelve metropolitans and bishops) and two dioceses in Canada. Finally, two very large Coptic communities are rooted in Sudan and Libya, i.e., two countries bordering on Egypt and historically part of the Coptic jurisdiction. In

the past two decades, Coptic diasporas in Western countries have generally tried to better radicate in the society of their host countries, while maintaining transnational ties with the homeland. In fact, the growing number of Coptic communities in the diaspora have sought to protect the Coptic minority in Egypt and improve its political condition (Marzouki 2016).

In the case of the EthOC, Ethiopian immigrants have followed seasonal migration patterns for a long time within the Horn of Africa and to some African countries, such as Sudan, Egypt, and South Africa. As a result of the political upheavals in the 1970s, Ethiopian immigrants began to settle in the West, especially in Europe and the USA. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox diaspora emerged and developed even before the Marxist revolution of 1974, as testified by the fact that the EthOC established the Archdiocese for the Western Hemisphere already in 1972. From that year onwards, it established parishes in Europe, South Africa, and North America, generally sending priests from Ethiopia. Furthermore, in 1990 the Ethiopian Orthodox diaspora in South Africa ordained many priests and baptized thousands of people of Protestant origin (Chaillot 2012, p. 240). Broadly speaking, it can be stated that Ethiopian Orthodox communities are currently widespread in almost all Western countries.

Finally, in regard to Eritrea, it should be emphasized that contentions with neighboring Ethiopia have had a major influence on its historical development. Put briefly, Eritrea was declared a federated state with the Ethiopian Empire by the United Nations in 1952. Shortly thereafter, the Ethiopian government transformed Eritrea into an administrative province, and then annexed it in 1962. In this conflictual situation, Eritreans started a guerrilla war against the Ethiopian forces that lasted thirty years. In the 1970s, this situation led also to a civil war between the two main armed movements in the country (Plaut 2016). Because of this dramatic situation in the homeland, Eritrean immigrant communities abroad were characterized by transnational flows and civil-political efforts of a transnational nature (Hepner 2011). Consequently, the Eritrean Orthodox Church quite quickly established a vast archdiocese of the diaspora comprising North America, Europe, and the Middle East. It was initially established as the North American diocese in 2000, but in 2006 it evolved to include also Europe and the Middle East. Currently, ErOC's parishes and communities abroad are mainly present in the USA, Canada, Europe, Australia, and South Africa (for instance, see Hepner 2003; Chacko 2003).

The Coptic, Ethiopian, and Eritrean Orthodox diasporas are absorbed by the typical tasks of immigrant churches. Generally, they are engaged in the reconstruction and reproduction of the religious, ethnic and national identity of the homeland (Ebaugh and Chafetz 1999). Immigrant religious communities, indeed, play a different role than that are usual in the motherland, since they act as both religious and socio-cultural centers that bring together compatriots abroad. In addition, the immigrant faithful seek social resources in these Christian communities to deal with the daily challenges related to the precariousness of migrant condition. Thus, it becomes essential for them to build a social network of compatriots to face their troubles and necessities (Gallo 2016). In this regard, an increasing number of religious communities abroad have consolidated a kind of informal welfare for immigrant countrymen, which aims to meet their basic needs (Ambrosini et al. 2021). Finally, as mentioned above in these three diaspora religions, it is possible to recognize an expansion of both institutional and non-institutional transnational ties with the fatherland and the mother church. In fact, these diaspora religions are continuing both to provide material and economic support for their home communities, and to influence their national political arena (Brinkerhoff 2013; Giordan and Guglielmi 2018; Mohammad 2021).

In this multifaceted and global scenario, the main future challenge of these Christian diasporas concerns their settlement in host contexts, which may re-define the main religious-ethnic linkage within their identity. The new country's societal environment can negotiate habits, rites and teachings of its own religion, evolving through forms of syncretism and cultural adaptation. Therefore, churches' patterns of establishment abroad may change their identity; both maintaining traditional religious reference points and developing relevant religious transformations. Following a sociological perspective, in the next decades some

important indications related to the rooting of diaspora religions (such as: their use of the language of the host country as the liturgical language; their request for greater autonomy with respect to the church of origin; their development of an identity hybridized with the host country; and their acceptance of the cultural norms of the new society (Guglielmi 2018)) will suggest whether the Coptic, Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporas are really re-shaping the historical religion–ethnicity entanglement within their identity.

## 6. Eastern Orthodoxy and Africa

Eastern Orthodoxy is the second-largest tradition of Christianity and the biggest tradition of Eastern Christianity. It operates as a communion of fourteen autocephalous churches, in which the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is recognized as *primus inter pares* or ‘first among equals’ (McGuckin 2008). Broadly speaking, in the fifth century these Orthodox churches were a territorial part of the Eastern Church, which recognized the Council of Chalcedon and did not endorse the schism of the Oriental Orthodoxy.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa is an autocephalous church that is part of the above communion. It is located in Alexandria in Egypt, and has canonical responsibility for the entire African continent. Such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, it claims to have succeeded the Apostle Mark in the office of the Bishop of Alexandria, marking the beginning of Christianity in Africa in the 1st century. The dispute on this prominent legacy is related to the controversies and the following schism that arose in the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. (see Section 4). On the one hand, the majority of the native population did not accede to the Council of Chalcedon, becoming known as the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria and adhering to Oriental Orthodoxy (see Section 4.1). On the other hand, a minor percentage of the Church of Alexandria acceded to the Council, becoming known as the Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria. In this respect, the latter church used Greek as a liturgical language and remained in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Hardy 1952).

In the 19th century, Orthodoxy in Africa started to increase through the migration of people from various countries with an Orthodox majority (Greece, Lebanon, Syria, and Russia). Moreover, a significant Greek community settled in Alexandria from the 1840s onwards, and established churches and schools. Considering the increase in flows of Orthodox immigrants to Africa, and in order to avoid jurisdictional confusions and canonical conflicts, in the 1920s the Orthodox communion stipulated that all Orthodox churches in Africa should be under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. As a consequence of this development, during the following century Greek Orthodox missions were established within the communities of Greek settlers in African territories, creating new places of worship tied to the Patriarchy of Alexandria. In that historical period, the development of Orthodoxy in Africa merged with the colonial ambitions of Greece and other related countries such as Cyprus and Crete. In this regard, it seems there were not well-drawn boundaries among nationalistic attitudes, the goal of world-spreading Hellenism, and the ecclesial aims of the Christian mission. Moreover, the colonialism of some Western countries also discouraged the development of Orthodox communities in certain African countries, such as Kenya (Voulgarakis 2007).

In the recent post-colonial era, renewed missionary efforts were enacted by Pope Petros VII (Boutros El-Gawly; 1997–2004) and then Pope Theodoros II (Nikolaos Horeftakis; 2004–today). During their mandate, they endeavored to spread the Orthodox faith in Arab nations and throughout Africa, encouraging both the growth of native clergy and the use of local languages in the liturgy. Finally, they attempted to enhance understanding between Orthodox and Muslims, and to improve ecumenical relations with the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Despite the efforts of the last two patriarchs, however, the journey towards an indigenous path of this church in Africa still seems to be long. Not yet achieved is the development of an African identity within Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as the real embrace by the said patriarchate of the manifold decolonization processes. One can focus on this

issue by examining the current leadership of the Orthodox Church of Alexandria: out of thirty-one archbishops, only three have African origins, while all the other clergymen originate from Greece, Cyprus and Crete. Considering this situation, Gerasimos Makris states that Eastern Orthodoxy in Africa should go beyond the longstanding tensions between Hellenocentrism and the Christian mission:

Unfortunately, this persistence on continuity has proved a thorn in the side of modern Orthodox missionary activities in Africa and elsewhere as, ironically, it continues indirectly to proclaim the Greekness of the Church. Given the relationship between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Greek nation-state, that is to be expected. Views such as those expressed by Fr Anastasios (currently Archbishop of Albania), who called for the development of an African Orthodoxy with local clergy and local expressions of liturgical life and art, and those of the then Bishop of Carthage and later Patriarch of Alexandria Parthenios, who argued that Christ should be spread in Africa by black Orthodox missionaries, have given some much-needed impetus to the emerging Orthodox missionary efforts, but have not managed to disseminate this newly found acceptance of cultural difference and its progressive theological underpinnings to the ‘mother’ Greek Orthodox Church (Makris 2010, p. 249).

In conclusion, the relief of many African countries from the burden of colonialism raises the challenge of developing a native Orthodox clergy, as well as of fostering an inculturation able to combine the cultural, artistic, and religious heritages of Byzantium with those of Africa. In that sense, the path towards the indigenization of Eastern Orthodoxy in Africa seems both realistic and still tortuous, as well as that towards the awareness of Greek religious leadership in favoring/accepting the relevant processes of decolonization.

Against this historical background and according to a sociological perspective (Abramson 1980), into the case of the Patriarchate of Alexandria the religious identity seems to re-shape the ethnic one. When this third type of religion–ethnicity entanglement is compared to the second one already analyzed, usually the earlier “ethnic religion” is perceived to be inheritable, while this “religious ethnicity” is not so and instead may be acquired (Kivisto 2007, pp. 494–95). In particular, the establishment and spread of the Patriarchate of Alexandria in Africa is mainly based on the past colonial and missionary efforts of the Hellenic world. Therefore, the belonging to this Orthodox jurisdiction shaped the African identity through an (external) “religious ethnicity” still in the process of being absorbed and assimilated by local populations.

Not by chance, in recent times the Russian Orthodox Church has raised and partially exploited the issue of developing a true African identity within Eastern Orthodoxy. This church established a Patriarchal Exarchate in Africa in December 2021 as a result of a major ecclesial conflict that developed in Ukraine in December 2018 (Rozanskij 2022). In its competition with the Patriarchate of Alexandria for gaining local clerics and the faithful, the ROC has argued to promote with its presence a fresh pattern for the inculturation of Eastern Orthodoxy in Africa. Unrelated to the historical legacy of colonialism, the ROC argues to give space to multiple African ethnic traits within the Eastern Orthodox identity. The Russian Orthodox mission in Africa claims to generate dynamic combinations and entanglements of religion–ethnicity features, and encourage more powerful native paths than those ones experienced by African Orthodoxy in the previous century.

## 7. Orthodox Christianity and African-Americans

The African-American encounter with Eastern Orthodoxy developed a novel religion–ethnic linkage within this Christian tradition. We address the development of this ecclesial community by briefly considering the biography of the first African-American Orthodox priest, and by describing the establishment of the African Orthodox Church (AOC). Then, we highlight their legacy in the current North American Orthodox landscape by exploring the case of the Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black. The parallels between these different experiences suggest a century-long African-American continuity within Eastern Orthodoxy



in the USA (Herbel 2010), which shaped a less visible entanglement of religious and ethnic traits into this religion in North America.

Robert Josias Morgan (1868–1922) was born in Jamaica, and for several years he served the Anglican Communion as a missionary in Africa, and as a deacon and priest in the USA. He was ordained as Fr. Raphael in Constantinople in 1907, thus becoming the first African-American Orthodox priest (Herbel 2014, pp. 61–76). His ordination in the Orthodox ministry had been the culmination of years of spiritual discernment. He studied Orthodox tradition and teachings while attending the Greek Orthodox church in Philadelphia as well as other Oriental and Eastern congregations, and on making a religious journey to Russia. Consequently, Fr. Morgan's main task became to establish an Eastern Orthodox community among African-Americans. He spent a year among Syrian Orthodox Christians in Jamaica in 1912, and on returning to the USA he served the Greek Orthodox community in Philadelphia. He remained engaged with the Jamaican and African-American communities in the city, and founded the Order of the Cross of Golgotha, which was a small lay religious fraternity. As Morgan pursued his theological journey, through his encounter with the Eastern Orthodox identity he was also processing the racial issues of his time. He addressed such issues by concentrating on a religious answer, and avoiding fundamentalist doctrines such as forms of Black nationalism (Herbel 2010, pp. 15–16).

In the same period as Father Morgan's activities, George Alexander McGuire (1866–1934) established the African Orthodox Church (September 1921), designating himself Patriarch Alexander (Herbel 2014, pp. 76–84). Previously, Fr. McGuire had been a public figure as the chaplain for the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was a Black nationalist fraternal organization founded by the political activist Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887–1940). Fr. McGuire designed AOC's structure to be like that of the Anglican Church; nonetheless, he assumed theological teachings focused on Orthodox Christianity. Therefore, the AOC developed as a sort of Western rite an Orthodox church for the American community of African descent. In this regard, the AOC bishop Daniel William Alexander (1883–1970) encapsulated the church's mission by stating that "the East and the West have met each other in the African Orthodox Church". The church headed by McGuire spread rapidly in the African continent, and especially in South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda. However, despite its great development especially in the initial phase, after the death of the founder and some conflicts the AOC was unable to continue its settlement. Currently, it is a small denomination with a few followers in North America and South Africa.

On the other hand, in 1993 an African-American movement grew within Orthodox Christianity in North America. Fr. Moses Berry, an Orthodox priest belonging to the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), began to organize an annual conference for the Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black. Thereafter, he established an Orthodox parish in Missouri in 1998, and opened the Ozarks African-American Heritage Museum in Ash Grove in 2002 (Herbel 2014, pp. 85–102). Fr. Berry converted to Eastern Orthodoxy through a discernment oriented towards a Christian tradition able to include all races of people. During his first experiences with Orthodox worships and churches, he noted that Eastern Christian iconographies included St. Moses the Black and the martyrs from the Boxer Rebellion. On the basis of these aspects, Fr. Moses identified the spiritual roots of African-American Christianity in early African Christian monasticism. He thus elaborated a link between African-American identity and that one of ancient African Christianity through the establishment of the Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black.

In conclusion, the religious journeys of Fr. Morgan, Fr. McGuire, and Fr. Berry appear to be tied to the general efforts by several African-Americans in the twentieth century to find their true Christian pre-slavery identity. The development of an African-American component in Eastern Christian identity can be related to how African-Americans dealt with the racial question. From a historical perspective, in fact, Eastern Orthodoxy was not associated with racism and colonialism in the Americas—thus broadly appearing as a decolonized Christian milieu. Therefore, according to a sociological perspective (Abramson 1980), the religious identity of Orthodox African-Americans seems to re-shape the ethnic



one. The conversion of African-Americans to Eastern Orthodoxy has re-fashioned the meanings of their ethnic and racial traits towards a pre-slavery identity. According to the fourth and last type of religion-ethnicity relationship, generally African-Americans were in fact perceived by local populations as having an “ethnic autonomy” from religion.

### 8. Eastern-Rite Catholic Churches and Africa

The Eastern-rite Catholic churches are twenty-three churches *sui iuris*, i.e., Catholic churches endowed with a particular autonomy. They are in full communion with the Holy See, and are part of the worldwide Catholic Church. According to the Code of Canons of the Eastern Catholic Churches, they are governed by their own patriarchs, major archbishops, and metropolitans. Moreover, each church preserves its own law, culture, and tradition. In this regard, sociological and anthropological studies on this Christian tradition are lacking, although some social scientists have recently started to explore the distinctive features of these churches (Hann and Goltz 2010; Mahieu and Naumescu 2009).

In the general understanding, these churches are identified with the Greek-Catholic churches settled in Eastern Europe and with the group of Syrian churches. However, this religious tradition is much more diverse and plural than this popular view of it, since a piece of this Christian mosaic consists of African churches. The Coptic Catholic Church was founded in 1741, when a Coptic bishop in Jerusalem, Anba Athanasius, became a Catholic. Pope Benedict XIV appointed him as the apostolic vicar of a small community of 2000 Egyptian Coptic Catholics. Currently, this church has 250 priests, and it comprises 166 congregations and around 175,000 believers throughout Egypt (Annuario Pontificio 2016). The Ethiopian Catholic Church was founded more recently (1846), but its origin is related to Catholic missionaries who arrived in Ethiopia in the 14th century. Currently, this church is composed of four eparchies, in which 285 priests serve, and it has 107 congregations as well as around 70,000 believers (Annuario Pontificio 2016). Lastly, the Eritrean Catholic Church is the most recently established in this Christian tradition. Pope Francis recognized it as a *sui iuris* Eastern Catholic church in 2015, granting it autonomy from the Ethiopian Catholic Church. It is composed of four eparchies, which comprise 150 congregations, around 160,000 believers, and 498 priests (Annuario Pontificio 2016). Eritrea is thus the only country in which all Catholics, i.e., the Eastern and the Latin ones, are assigned to the pastoral care of Eastern Catholic bishops.

Broadly speaking, through a sociological examining of the African group of Eastern-rite Catholic churches (i.e., the Coptic Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, and the Eritrean Catholic Church), it seems possible to recognize a type of minority “ethnic religion” (Kivisto 2007). The identity of these quite recent churches furnishes an alternative (and not monolithic) synthesis of religion and ethnicity in their homelands. In this respect, through their development as religious minorities, these churches aim to challenge the main religion–ethnicity entanglement in their country (Forster et al. 2000), and to promote the co-existence of more flexible identities. More broadly, this alternative entanglement appears to find a certain resonance into the same crucial foundations of Eastern Catholicism. Indeed, the “other Catholics” have major Orthodox churches counterparts in their countries, and each of their ecclesial bodies has a ‘particular church’ status into the Roman Catholic system. These churches are called to forge an organic and dynamic identity blending of Eastern and Western Christian features, but this has yet to occur (Galadza 2008).

### 9. Concluding Remarks

Adopting a sociological perspective, the article has underlined the richness of the African milieu and populations in Eastern Christianity—although this fact is underestimated in the scholarly debate. In that context, different types of entanglement between religion and ethnicity appeared to powerfully model the identity of the above churches, as well as to influence the social history of each considered area/region/country. However, the first two research perspectives framed in Section 2 also seemed to play a significant role in shaping the identities of African churches. Although we analyzed the diasporas belong-

ing only to Oriental Orthodoxy, religious transnationalism is an established feature of both African Christian religions and Eastern or Oriental Christianity, which is largely impacting their lives in the motherland (Adogame 2013; Giordan and Zrinščak 2020; Guglielmi 2022; Paulau and Tamcke 2022). Moreover, beyond the most prominent evidences examined within the Patriarchate of Alexandria and African-American Orthodox communities, the multifaceted issues of decolonization are still affecting the imagination and the identity of African religions and traditions (Mbiti 1990).

Summarizing the findings that emerged from the sociological comparison of the religion–ethnicity entanglements (Abramson 1980; Kivisto 2007), the Coptic Orthodox Church appears to have formed its religious identity through the heritage of Egyptian origin, operating as an ancient native church and ‘first among equals’ within the Oriental Orthodox communion. On the other hand, the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches seem to have pursued indigenous Christian paths of Black Africa, mending/reuniting through their identity those ones of multiple ethnic groups. Concerning the Eastern Orthodox communion, the Church of Alexandria has proved both to maintain a colonial heritage linked to the Hellenic world and to develop increasingly marked features of African Christianity. Hence, the future of this church seems to be related to the next steps in the indigenization of Eastern Orthodoxy in Africa and the societal assimilation of a new religion–ethnicity linkage. In a similar extent, the African-American encounter with Eastern Orthodoxy has generated a novel entanglement of this religious tradition with ethnic and racial traits, which is tied to the attempts by this African-American ecclesial community to find an identity freed from the experience of slavery. Finally, the African churches established within the Eastern-rite Catholicism have framed this religious tradition as a more complex Christian landscape, while promoting fresh minorities’ identities within the Catholic religion and an alternative religious–ethnic synthesis in their traditionally Orthodox countries.

Turning back to the perspective of Émile Durkheim (1982), into our sharpening of the above identities, they revealed their sociological sense of oneness and collective membership. These social identities appeared as the durable outcome of groups’ involvement in both religious and ethnic rituals, habits and stances throughout their social history, displaying the powerful entanglement among holy symbols and ethnic representations. On the other hand, as regards to future developments of African churches in Eastern Christianity, we may consider how tensions in current contemporary societies are posing to them engaging questions regarding their possible identity transformations. In this respect, the challenge of handling ones own religious boundaries and ethnic heritage could profoundly affect a branch of Christianity, such as the Eastern branch, focused on the conservative role of tradition, and a population such as that of Africa, which has experienced changes and adaptations given by migration and external influences since ancient times.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For instance, one may consider the several studies related to Africa in this Brill book series: <https://brill.com/view/serial/GPCS?language=en> (accessed on 20 June 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> In addition to the previously quoted works for a basic understanding of Eastern Christian theology and ecclesiology (McGuckin 2008; Parry 2010), we would refer to Ware (1993) and Taft (1999).
- <sup>3</sup> Although the diasporic phenomenon has also powerfully affected churches belonging to Eastern Orthodoxy, within this Christian tradition transnational migrations have only marginally involved Africa. Indeed, the immigrant faithful of the Patriarchate of Alexandria—a church that will be analyzed in the next section—are very few and attend parishes abroad of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

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