

RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD

TENTH EDITION

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African Religions

We worship the Orisha. If we worship the Orisha, We will always have money, We will always have children.

—Yoruba Song

Africa is the second largest continent. It is home to nearly 3,000 ethnic and linguistic groups totaling over 900 million people. Traditional African societies range from small nomadic bands living deep in the tropical forest and the deserts of North and South Africa to large-scale kingdoms and empires. Because so many Africans were brought to the Americas as slaves and struggled for many centuries to regain freedom and dignity, African religions have had an influence that extends far beyond the continent's borders. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of Africa came under European colonial rule. During the last fifty years colonialism has nearly vanished. The new nations of Africa have become a vocal and active segment of the developing world. Many of them control raw materials vital to the industrialized world. Leaders of the industrialized nations must learn to understand and work with Africans on political and business levels if there are to be peace and prosperity in the world. At the same time, African Americans have acquired powerful voices in their own societies and have become increasingly concerned about and interested in their African heritage. Understanding African religions is an essential part of developing

an atmosphere of trust and cooperation with African leaders and nations. It is also important for understanding the history and cultures of African Americans. As is the case for most other people, religion is a keystone of African cultures. A basic understanding of African religions will provide knowledge of customs and attitudes toward the family, society at large, the environment, and death and the life beyond. Perhaps no religions have been more confused in the minds of Western people as those of Africa. Western perceptions and understandings of African religions and cultures have been limited by two quite different stereotypes that have more to do with Western ethnic and racial politics than with the realities of African civilizations. The first presents Africa as a land of savagery and superstition and has been used all too often to justify white racism and the mistreatment of African and African American people. The other stereotype is more positive but unfortunately no less inaccurate. It values African symbols, literature, and art but treats this vast continent as a unified whole. While this positive stereotype has helped to combat older, negative images of Africa, it contributes very little to the understanding of Africa, its peoples, and

cultures. Both of these images are based on a combination of half truths and fertile imaginations. To arrive at a genuine understanding of the richness of African civilizations and their contributions to the world, it is necessary to overcome both of these stereotypes.

Native Religions

When discussing African religions, we cannot speak with authority about a single religion, theology, world view, or ritual system. Africa is a huge continent with many varied and ancient cultures. Because most African religions have existed in premodern times, and left few written records, modern students of religion must understand that only the tip of the iceberg can be known. Most of what is known about traditional

African religions has been collected by anthropologists and missionaries or remembered from the past by Africans. While in the past the study of African religions was conducted mainly by Europeans and Americans, today African scholars and writers are more and more active in the study and documentation of their own traditions. These African voices help to provide a more balanced and accurate picture of the religious lives of African peoples. As we have come to understand the richness and diversity of African cultures it has become increasingly clear that the religious beliefs and customs of one group of Africans are not necessarily shared by others. Even when we speak of the basic concepts of these religions, we must keep in mind that these ideas are not universally shared or evenly distributed throughout the continent. There is a great variety of beliefs and practices in African tradition.

The High God

The belief that there is a supreme High God who created the world and then withdrew from active participation in it is common in polytheistic religions around the world. This belief is shared by many African people. Although most African religions are polytheistic in day-to-day practice, there is a common belief that beyond all of the minor gods, goddesses, spirits, and ancestors there is one High God who created and in some sense still governs the universe.



The Sande mask is worn by the chief dancer of the secret Sande society during a ceremony to initiate young girls into womanhood. (Kent State University School of Art Gallery)

In many African religions the High God appears as a creator who did his work and retired to a distant place. It is often believed that he has little contact with the world and its daily operation, though he may be appealed to at times of great crisis. The Yoruba story of Olorun is typical of African understandings of this High God. The Yoruba live in the West African nation of Nigeria.¹ In Yoruba mythology, the High God, Olorun, gave the job of creating the world to his eldest son, Obatala. This son failed to complete the task, so Olorun passed it on to the younger son, Odudua—but he too failed. Therefore Olorun had to complete the work of creation himself. He assigned tasks of creation to various *orisha*, who are regarded as lesser deities. After the work of creation was done, Olorun seems to have retired to the heavens with little interest in, or control of, his universe. Although various Yoruba villages have special *orisha* who have saved them or helped them in times of trouble, there is no record that Olorun ever has been of direct assistance. He remains detached from the problems of the world and allows the *orisha* to intervene when necessary.

A legend from Mozambique in southeast Africa reveals the retiring nature of the High God even more clearly.

In the beginning Nyambi made all things. He made animals, fishes, birds. At that time he lived on earth with his wife, Nasilele. One of Nyambi's creatures was different from all the others. His name was Kamonu. Kamonu imitated Nyambi in everything Nyambi did. When Nyambi worked in wood, Kamonu worked in wood; when Nyambi forged iron, Kamonu forged iron.

After a while Nyambi began to fear Kamonu.

Then one day Kamonu forged a spear and killed a male antelope, and he went on killing. Nyambi grew very angry at this.

"Man, you are acting badly," he said to Kamonu. "These are your brothers. Do not kill them."

Nyambi drove Kamonu out into another land. But after a while Kamonu returned. Nyambi allowed him to stay and gave him a garden to cultivate. It happened that at night buffaloes wandered into Kamonu's garden and he speared them; after that some elands, and he killed one. After some time Kamonu's dog died; then his pot broke; then his child died. When Kamonu went to Nyambi to tell him what had happened he found his dog and his pot and his child at Nyambi's.

Then Kamonu said to Nyambi, "Give me medicine so that I may keep my things." But Nyambi refused to give him medicine. After this, Nyambi met with his two counselors and said, "How shall we live since Kamonu knows too well the road hither?"

Nyambi tried various means to flee Kamonu. He removed himself and his court to an island across the river. But Kamonu made a raft of reeds and crossed over to Nyambi's island. Then Nyambi piled up a huge mountain and went to live on its peak. Still Nyambi could not get away from man. Kamonu found his way to him. In the meantime men were multiplying and spreading all over the earth.

Finally Nyambi sent birds to go look for a place for Litoma, god's town. But the birds failed to find a place. Nyambi sought counsel from a diviner. The diviner said, "Your life depends on Spider." And Spider went and found an abode for Nyambi and his court in the sky. Then Spider spun a thread from earth to the sky and Nyambi climbed up on the thread. Then the diviner advised Nyambi to put out Spider's eyes so that he could never see the way to heaven again and Nyambi did so.

¹From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century many Yoruba were brought to the new world as slaves. Yoruba religion continues to flourish in South America, Brazil, and the Caribbean. Immigration from these areas has renewed interest in Yoruba religion and culture in the United States.

After Nyambi disappeared into the sky Kamonu gathered some men around him and said, "Let's build a high tower and climb up to Nyambi." They cut down trees and put log on log, higher and higher toward the sky. But the weight was too great and the tower collapsed. So that Kamonu never found his way to Nyambi's home.

But every morning when the sun appeared, Kamonu greeted it saying, "Here is our king. He has come." And all the other people greeted him shouting and clapping. At the time of the new moon men call on Nasilele, Nyambi's wife.²

The Nuer of the Sudan provide a striking exception to the retiring nature of the High God. The Nuer believe that the High God, known as Kwoth Nhial or the spirit of the sky, continues to play an active role in the lives of human beings. He is the guardian of moral law, punishing those who do evil and rewarding those who uphold the moral virtues of Nuer society. He is believed to love and care for his creation and is asked for blessing and assistance during troubled times and prior to dangerous undertakings such as battles.

Few African people focus as much attention on the High God as the Nuer do. Most Africans regard the High God as too distant, and too great to pay much attention to the prayers and petitions of human beings. It is the lesser spirits and the ancestors who receive the greatest attention in African religions. Even among the Nuer there is a host of lesser deities known to them as the "children of God."

The Lesser Spirits

When we move beyond tales of the High God that are found in many African religions, we encounter animistic faiths. Like many other peoples, most Africans believe that the universe is populated by spirits as well as humans and animals. The earth, the sky, and the waters are believed to contain spiritual or life forces similar to that of humankind. These forces can be beneficial or harmful. In either case they are subject to prayer, flattery, and sacrifice. Because they have a direct influence on human life, African people try to understand the spirits and seek their favor.

Spirits or life forces are present in the mountains, forest, pools, streams, and many plants and animals. They are also found in storms, thunder, lightning, tides, and other forces of nature. They can be female or male. In some African cultures there are temples and priests dedicated to the worship of storm gods. The earth is also worshiped. As in ancient Europe and many other traditional cultures the earth is often pictured as a goddess and associated with fertility. Among the Ashanti people, for example, there are regular ceremonies for the Earth Mother in which the following prayer is recited:

Earth, while I am yet alive,
It is upon you that I put my trust
Earth who receives my body,
We are addressing you,
And you will understand.³

²Susan Feldman, ed., *African Myths and Tales* (New York: Dell, 1963), pp. 36–37.

³Geoffery Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (Chicago: Hutchinson House, 1954), p. 48.



Yoruba Epa mask as worn by a dancing figure.
The Yoruba are a tribal people living in West Africa.
(Marsha van der Heyden/Pearson Education/PH College)

Water is often seen as a sacred element. Water is used in religious ritual the world over and is particularly sacred and important in many basic religions, including those of Africa. When the life of a people depends on water in the form of rainfall, rivers, streams, and lakes it often appears to have a life of its own. When Africans use water for religious rituals such as the washing of the newborn and the dead, the water must come from a source of *sacred, living water*, such as a river or a spring. It must not be heated or boiled, or in modern times treated with chemicals, because that would kill the spirit or power in it. Because snakes are often connected with bodies of water, they too are regarded with awe and are sometimes worshiped as powerful spiritual forces.

Even though nature gods, goddesses, and lesser spirits are not always a major element of African religions, they are recognized and worshiped in most traditional African religions. Their worship varies from elaborate systems of temples, priests, and rituals to less formal worship conducted by individuals and family groups. Perhaps the most common form of worship of these lesser spirits is an offering of food or drink. An African who wishes to acknowledge the spirits or ask them for help will often pour water, wine, beer, or milk on the ground. When more elaborate offerings are required the spirits may be presented with elaborate meals accompanied by singing and dancing. In general they are treated with signs of honor and respect similar to those with which important and powerful people are treated.

The worship of the Yoruba goddess Osun provides an illustration of the ways in which these elements are combined in a major African religion. Osun is one of the most important female *orisha* and is described as a powerful, beautiful, and graceful goddess. She is a strong mother and the guardian of the life force responsible for the fertility of the land and the birth of children. She is worshiped by women and men at an annual ceremony that includes music, dance, and offerings of food and drink. The worshipers celebrate the power of the goddess and her ability to bestow health and fertility on her devotees.⁴

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⁴Diedre Badejo, *Osun Seeges. The Elegant Diety of Wealth, Power and Femininity*. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996) pp. 103–122.

Ancestors

The most commonly recognized spiritual forces in African religions are ancestors. Many Africans believe that departed family members continue to live in the spirit world and that the ancestors, unlike the High God, take an active interest in the well-being of those who live in this world. The ancestors are thought of as being part of a "Cloud of Witnesses." They are believed to watch the spectacle of life and actively participate in the affairs of the living. They can help a person, a family, and even a nation if they wish. Ancestors are often consulted before the birth of a child, at the beginning of the agricultural season, and even prior to battles or political conflicts. In some areas no one may eat the first fruit of the harvest before a portion of it has been offered to the ancestors.

It is the ancestors' ability to harm as well as to help that makes them such a potent force in African religions. Africans' fear of any god is almost unimportant compared with their fear of, as well as respect for, the ancestors. While Chinese and Japanese revere and respect their ancestors, Africans are also often afraid of them. For Africans ancestors are often capricious and unpredictable. In this way they are much like other powerful people. Despite all of the offerings and respect that they are given, ancestors may turn on a person or even a community. They are often believed to be the cause of famines, droughts, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. They are thought to cause sickness and even death. One of the worst misfortunes that can befall an African couple is childlessness; it is often thought to be caused by the anger of the ancestors. Because respect for and fear of the dead is a basic part of African consciousness, it is the ancestors, rather than the gods, who are believed to enforce social and moral codes.

Because of this great concern for the ancestors, Africans frequently offer gifts and sacrifices to them. It is believed that the ancestors are the actual owners of the land and its products. Therefore, before the living can enjoy the bounty of the land, a portion of it must be offered to the ancestors. At harvest time, rural people make large offerings to them. When new animals are born, some must be slaughtered and offered to the ancestors to ensure continued blessings. Urban Africans continue these traditions, often returning to their native villages to make offerings to their ancestors or finding homes for them in urban places.

Ancestors are believed to communicate with the living in a variety of ways, most often in dreams. At times the message of the dream is clear and direct, but at other times the dreamer must seek the help of a diviner or other religious specialist to understand it. The ancestors might send signs that can be seen in nature or in the organs of sacrificial animals. Diviners who can recognize and explain these signs play important roles in many African religions.

Sometimes, ancestors use more direct means to communicate with the living. Among the Tallensi, there is a story of a young man named Pu-eng-yii who left his own family and settled with a rival group to earn more wealth. By doing this he cut himself off from his ancestors as well as his family, offending them both. In his search for wealth Pu-eng-yii suffered a serious leg injury in an automobile accident. When he asked a diviner about the cause of the accident he was told that his ancestors were angry. Actually they intended to kill him but had failed to follow through with their plan. The diviner told Pu-eng-yii that he must make restitution to his family and his ancestors and cut his ties with his adopted family. The unfortunate man gave in to these demands, returned to his own family, and offered the proper sacrifices because he feared death.⁵

⁵Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 149.

Diviners who have the ability to contact the ancestors are often asked to inquire about the future. Not only do the ancestors know about what is happening among the living in the present, they also know what the future will bring and are believed to have the power to influence it. Therefore, Africans often consult the ancestors before special events, ranging from building a house to fighting a war.

Sacrifice

African religions usually include rituals and sacrifices that seek to appease gods, goddesses, and ancestors and provide safe and proper transition through the various stages of life. Sacrifice and ritual smooth these transitions and provide a point of communion between humans and the spirit world. Perhaps the most common rituals in African religions are daily offerings to the gods, goddesses, and ancestors. As a display of recognition to the deities and ancestors, those who live in this world pour out a bit of their drink or toss away bits of their food. These simple ritual acts are believed to maintain good relationships with the spirits and ancestors who play such important roles in the daily lives of many African people.

There is animal sacrifice on more serious occasions. The blood of animals such as dogs, birds, sheep, goats, and cattle is poured on the ground to placate deities when they are angry or to ensure their support in some difficult period. Blood sacrifices may be offered when a community is preparing for a battle, or in modern African nations, for an election campaign, or when there has been a long drought or in times of illness. A person engaged in the dangerous business of hunting may wish to offer a sacrifice to one of the deities before the hunt. In modern times, the Yoruba god Ogun, who was for centuries described as the god of iron, has become known as the god of automobiles and trucks. Drivers engaged in the all-too-often deadly business of operating motor vehicles on unsafe roads and streets offer dogs to him and decorate cars and trucks with his symbols. His protection is sought for other iron objects as well, as this sacrificial song illustrates:

Ogun, here are Ehun's kola nuts;
 He rides a bicycle,
 He cultivates with a machet,
 He fells trees with an axe,
 Do not let Ehun meet your anger this year,
 Take care of him,
 He comes this year,
 Enable him to come next season.⁶

Often on the occasion of animal sacrifice, the worshiper shares the flesh of the animal with the deity or ancestor to whom it is offered. After the blood of the animal has been poured on the ground or an altar, the meat is roasted or boiled. A portion is given to the deity by placing it on the altar, and another portion is eaten by the person who brought the sacrifice and his or her family. This establishes a communion between the living and the spirits and is an expression of the almost universal human belief that eating together establishes a social or spiritual bond.

⁶Ibid., p. 80.

Only rarely has human sacrifice been a part of native African religions. The frequency of this practice was grossly exaggerated in movies and in nineteenth-century tales of cannibalism and great stacks of human skulls. Although some African groups did occasionally sacrifice humans to their gods, such sacrifices were rare and occurred only on the most serious occasions. An Akikuyu legend tells of a time when there was a great drought in the land. A diviner determined that it would only rain when a particular girl was sacrificed. The girl was placed in the center of the village, where she gradually sank into the ground. When she had sunk to the depth of her nose, rain began to fall. Her family allowed her to sink completely out of sight as the rain continued. It was only a lover's following her into the earth that spared her life. Eventually, he was able to find her and bring her back to the surface again.⁷ This is actually not a tale of human sacrifice, but rather of the salvation of a community through the self-sacrifice of one of its members and her ultimate return to her people. It speaks not of a disregard for human life, but rather of the courage of those who sacrifice themselves for the good of the community.

The most common form of human sacrifice occurred when a great king died and it was believed that he needed servants in the next life. At such times, some people were sacrificed to accompany their leader to the world of the dead. Apparently human sacrifice was practiced only in the most extreme conditions and unlike animal sacrifices was never intended as a regular means of establishing communion with the spirit world. The flesh of the victim was almost never eaten. Cannibalism in any form seems to have been restricted to a very small number of tribal groups.

Rites of Passage

In almost all societies important points on the pathway of life are marked and celebrated with ritual. These passage points are most often birth, puberty, marriage, and death. In societies where religion is a major force in social life, there is often no clear distinction between the secular and the religious. In Africa, and in many other religious societies, rites of passage are usually regulated by religious practices and functionaries.

The birth of a child is a cause for great rejoicing in African cultures. Children are thought of as great blessings from the world of the spirits. A childless couple will go to great lengths to determine the cause of their plight and to alleviate it. Not all childbirths are welcomed, however. Twins, for example, are often thought of as dangerous or evil. Sometimes twins are regarded as a sign that the wife has been unfaithful and that each baby has a different father. Occasionally one or both of the twins is killed. Sometimes, the twins and their mother are forced to live apart from the community. Among other African people, the taboo against twins is reversed and they are considered to be extremely lucky for the community in which they are born.

In many African societies, including the Ashanti, children are not named or given much consideration for the first week of life. Because of the high infant mortality rate, it is considered unwise for a family to become too attached to what might be a ghost child who has come to trick them into loving it. If the baby lives through the first week or so of life, it is considered to be a real human baby and attention and joy are lavished on it. At this point, the baby is named. In some cases a lengthy process of divination may be

⁷Feldman, *African Myths and Tales*, pp. 278–280.



Abakweta dancers at an initiation ceremony in the Cape Province of South Africa. (*Homer J. Smith/Pearson Education/PH College*)

used to choose a proper name for the child. Other African people recite the names of ancestors until the child makes a motion or gesture of recognition. In this manner, the names of the ancestors are kept alive.

The ceremony of naming is often followed by showing the child to the moon. The Gu people of Benin throw their children gently into the air several times, instructing them to look at the moon. The Basuto of South Africa lift their children toward the moon and say, "There is your father's sister."⁸ Some African people practice circumcision at birth, but most wait until puberty.

During childhood young Africans receive instruction in their roles in society as well as training in agriculture, crafts, and increasingly modern education. As they approach **puberty**, instruction in the norms of social behavior becomes more intensive. **Special classes** are established separately for boys and girls in which they are taught how to behave as proper young men and women. They are also prepared for the initiation rituals that mark the passage from childhood to adult life. **For boys**, these rites may involve harsh physical trials including whipping and fasting **designed** to test their courage and resourcefulness. During these rituals they learn **about the religion**, myths, and morality of their people. Among some African groups, girls are secluded in special houses and encouraged to eat a great deal and grow plump to make them more attractive as brides. Both boys and girls receive special training in what is considered to be proper sexual behavior and conduct. These puberty rites and initiations may take a few days or several years. In recent years their length and severity have declined because of the opposition

⁸Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 94. In many African cultures, and in others throughout the world, a clear distinction is made between the **mother's brothers** and sisters and those of the father, who often play very different roles in the life of a child. Often the **mother's brothers** and sisters are authority figures, while the father's are regarded in a less formal, often familiar way.

of modern governments, the decline in the power of traditional village elders, and the desire of many parents that their children receive as much modern education as possible.

Puberty rites for boys often include ritual circumcision. No one seems to know where or when this practice began, but it is widely practiced in Africa and many other parts of the world. It may be, as Freud suggested, the final domination by the older males of the community over the young. Because circumcision is performed at puberty without any form of anesthetic, it is often regarded as a test of courage. The initiate is expected to endure the operation without crying out, flinching, or showing other signs of pain. Among some African people, the operation is performed by a man wearing a mask who represents the ancestors. This indicates that circumcision may provide a bodily sign of religious and cultural identity as it does for Jews and Muslims throughout the world.

Female circumcision is practiced by some African people, but there is growing opposition to it both among Africans with modern education and the international human rights and feminist communities. As with male circumcision, there seems to be no clear reason for the practice, although it is sometimes described as a means of controlling erotic desire.⁹

The severity of both male and female circumcision varies greatly. It ranges from very small cuts that pose no serious health threat to the initiate to extreme forms of genital mutilation that can be life threatening, particularly when performed in unsanitary conditions.

After puberty rites and initiation, young people are considered to be adults and are expected to assume both the responsibilities and privileges of adult life. One of the first of these adult roles is marriage. There is little of a religious nature about marriage in many traditional African societies. It is often more of a secular contract between the families involved. Virginity is highly prized, particularly among young women. Even after marriage chastity is considered a virtue by many African peoples and is strongly encouraged by traditional customs and mores. Polygamy is practiced by the elites of many traditional African societies. Frequently, a husband is forbidden sexual contact with his wife during pregnancy and for as long as she is nursing a child. Because this can often be for as long as two years, it is considered wise for a man who can afford it to have several wives living in separate houses. There are also occasional instances of polyandry, in which one woman is the wife of several brothers.

As in most societies death is surrounded with a great deal of ritual. The purpose of death rituals is to make the newly dead as comfortable as possible in their new existence so that they will not return to haunt the living. Many steps are taken during and after burial to prevent the dead from returning to their villages, homes, and families. Women fear that their husbands will return as ghosts and cause their wombs to die, making them infertile.

Because of the warm climate of much of Africa, the dead are buried as quickly as possible. On rare occasions, there are attempts to embalm or mummify the bodies of great leaders, such as kings. There are also a few examples of corpses being turned over to hyenas for disposal, but burial is the most common practice. Money, trinkets, tools, and weapons are buried with the body to make life in the next world as comfortable as possible.

⁹Female circumcision is also practiced by some Muslim peoples in North Africa even where it is prohibited by the government. Male circumcision is a universal practice in Muslim and Jewish societies and is very widely practiced by Christians and secular people in the United States. It is less common in European and other Christian communities.



A Peoule wedding in Mali, West Africa. (Stock Boston)

In some African societies it is believed that illness, misfortune, and death never “just happen” and are caused by witchcraft or foul play of some kind. In the past the dead were allowed to identify the person or persons who caused their deaths. Often, corpses would seem to point out the house of the killer or fall from the backs of bearers as they passed the guilty party. Persons accused in this way had to find some means of proving their innocence.

African religions generally do not have a system of eschatology or concepts of judgment and retribution after death. The dead simply move into the world of the spirits and continue to be interested in and effective among the living. Death rituals transform living humans into sacred ancestors. An exception to this is the belief of the LoDagaa people of Ghana. According to their religion, the departed person takes a long journey toward the land of the ancestors. Just before this land is reached, there is a river. A waiting ferryman must be paid to take the deceased across the river. If the deceased has led a good life, the crossing will be easy. If the deceased has been wicked she or he must swim across the river. This takes three years. People who have debts must wait on the bank until their creditors arrive to be paid. Once the deceased is in the land of the dead, there are further tests and ordeals in which the person’s lifetime deeds play a great part. Those who suffer because they are judged to have been evil ask the great god: “Why do you make us suffer?” God replies, “Because you sinned on earth.” And they ask: “Who created us?” To which god replies, “I did.” And they ask, “If you created us, did we know

evil when we came or did you give it to us?" God replies, "I gave it to you." Then the people ask, "Why was it that you knew it was evil and gave it to us?" God replies, "Stop, let me think and find the answer."¹⁰ Here the LoDagaa are asking a very basic religious question shared by all monotheistic faiths: Why should it be that an all-powerful god would allow evil a place in creation?

Religious Leaders

Because a great deal of traditional African religion is based on rituals performed regularly by individuals without the aid of priests, such as offerings of food and drink to the ancestors, the need for religious functionaries is not as great as in religions that rely on complex theology and rituals. Nevertheless, African religions do have leaders and specialists who are essential at critical times or places.

African religions generally do not require a priesthood. In western Africa, however, some communities maintain temples and altars to the gods. The existence of a temple almost requires a priesthood to maintain and control it. In these areas there are priests and sometimes priestesses who undergo lengthy periods of training in the ritual, mythology, and taboos connected with religion before they are allowed to serve.

One of the most common religious specialists in Africa is the spiritual curer. In almost all premodern societies illness is believed to have religious as well as natural causes. Even in the most advanced industrial societies many people turn to prayer and other religious activities as well as medical science when faced with serious illness. As previously mentioned, many African worldviews do not include the idea of what modern science would call "natural" causes of death and disease. There is generally a spiritual cause for these misfortunes: Someone has cast a spell or placed a curse on the one who has fallen ill, or the sick person has in some way offended one of the lesser spirits or ancestors. It is the spiritual curer's job to find the cause of the illness and prescribe a cure. The curer uses some form of divination to determine the nature of the curse and the one responsible for it. Then the curer, who can be either male or female, uses a combination of spiritual powers, offerings, and herbal remedies to drive away the witchcraft and dispel the curse. Some of these herbal remedies have proven to be effective medicines in the modern sense. It is also common for African people to call on a spiritual curer to clear a house or other building of witches, spirits, and curses before the owners occupy it.

Among the Acholi of Uganda, the evil spirits that cause a person to become ill are called *jok*.¹¹ The healer is called *ajwaka*. When the *ajwaka* enters the presence of the sick person, he attempts to draw the *jok* up into the head of the patient through music and song. When this is accomplished, the *ajwaka* enters into conversation with the *jok*. "Why have you come? What do you want? What is your name?" Finally, the evil spirit is driven out of the sick person by the *ajwaka*, captured in a gourd, and buried in the ground.

The spiritual curer is part religious specialist, part herbalist, and part psychologist. The curer's skills are highly valued and are sometimes imported into modern hospitals and clinics by Africans who don't want to leave anything to chance. For many, modern medicine

¹⁰Ray, *African Religions*, p. 146.

¹¹Noel Q. King, *Religions of Africa* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 30.

is understood to be a developed form of herbalism and divination that can treat some, but not all, of the causes of disease and misfortune. Becoming a spiritual curer is a long and involved process. When a young person decides to join or is called to this profession, he or she must apprentice with an established curer for several years to learn the many skills and secrets involved.

In many African communities the role of diviner is closely allied to that of healer. The diviner's task is to use spiritual powers and knowledge to find the causes of present misfortune, past secrets, and things to come. This individual can also ferret out witches and sorcerers. In some African communities, the diviner is primarily one who investigates the causes of trouble. In other communities, the action of prediction is more important.

Among the Ndembu of northwestern Zambia, individuals are chosen as diviners by being inhabited by a spirit. The spirit Kayong'u seeks out those whom he wants to become diviners, and it is believed that he first makes them ill. The deity thus shows people what he wants. A person so selected then goes through an elaborate initiation ritual and a long period of training.

The tools that African diviners use vary widely. Most commonly, they cast the shells of nuts to form a pattern and then read the pattern to find the answer they seek. Among the Yoruba, a diviner shakes 16 palm nuts out into one of 256 possible patterns. Each pattern is associated with several poems, each of which contains a message. Even the beginning diviner is supposed to know from memory a minimum of four poems for each pattern. This means that a person must memorize at least 1,024 poems to be a diviner; an experienced diviner will know many more. When the pattern has been cast and the poems recited, the person who has sought divination selects the poem that he or she believes to be the most meaningful.¹² Other methods of divination include casting dice and gazing into a bowl of water. At one time, among many African people, trials by ordeal determined the guilt or innocence of a person accused of a crime. The person being tried was given a poisonous substance to drink. If the person did not die, innocence was proven. In more recent times, a fowl has been substituted. When the fowl dies from the poison, guilt or innocence is determined by the way in which it falls.

Another religious functionary found from time to time in many parts of Africa is the prophet. Like the biblical prophet, this person is seen as one who speaks for the gods. When there is a political upheaval or religious revival, charismatic leaders appear and proclaim the words of the gods to their people. In the nineteenth century, several prophets led African people in resistance to the slave trade of colonialism. One of these was Ngun-deng, who arose among the Nuer of the southern Sudan and who spoke in the name of the sky god, Dengkur. Usually, African prophetic figures gain their authority by the power of their personalities and their message. They have great influence during their lifetimes, but they seldom leave successors.

One of the most enduring of the religious figures in Africa is the chief-king. Although some African societies have no monarchs, those that have kings and queens look upon them with great awe and reverence. These rulers are regarded as the tribal connection to the ancestors and are revered as the living symbol of the tribe. Because of this, they are the objects of many taboos. In some societies, they are considered so sacred that commoners may not look upon their faces. In others, it is regarded as certain death to eat

¹²Ray, *African Religions*, pp. 106–108.

food that has been prepared for the monarch. Some peoples, such as Bantus, actually look upon their rulers as gods incarnate.

Because the rulers represent the community, they must always be in good health. A sick monarch means a sick land. Therefore, any infirmity of the ruler must be dealt with quickly. In some societies, rulers are required to take their own lives when ill health or old age begins to weaken them. The queen of the Lovedu of South Africa carries poison with her at all times and is expected to use it to prevent her death by other means. In other areas and at other times, there have been stories indicating that the people felt it necessary to kill an aged or infirm king. In some cases, a substitute king is chosen to rule for a few days and is then ritually killed to spare the true king.

When the monarch dies, the death often is kept secret until a successor can be chosen and enthroned. It is believed that the former king or queen fully becomes a god as he or she enters the land of the ancestors. African monarchies are sometimes hereditary and the child of the monarch automatically comes to the throne. In others the person who is believed to be the wisest or who has been chosen by the gods is selected. Enthroning a monarch often includes very complicated initiation rituals. In many societies the new king or queen is belittled and even physically abused for a period of hours or days to teach lessons in humility before being allowed to assume the position of monarch.

Non-native African Religions

In addition to religions native to Africa, many others have found a home on the continent. Egypt was among the world's first centers of civilization. Later, the urban centers of North Africa were strongly influenced by Greek culture and religion, producing some of the most important scientific and religious innovations of the classical period. Christianity has played an important role in northern Africa since the first century. Judaism has flourished in the region at least since the time of the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem in 76 C.E. In Ethiopia there is a distinct branch of Judaism among the Falasha people. The Falashas trace their ancestry to the Queen of Sheba in the tenth century B.C.E. and practice a form of Judaism influenced by the Pentateuch, but they are unaware of the Talmud and other later Jewish religious texts. Islam first came to Africa during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, when a party of Muslims fled to Ethiopia to avoid persecution. It became a major force in Africa early in the seventh century and displaced Christianity in many regions. Muslim missionaries have been active in sub-Saharan Africa since at least the seventeenth century. They were followed by Christian missionaries in the early nineteenth century. The greatest growth in Christianity came after the 1950s when the Bible became widely available in African languages. Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Baha'i faith have come to Africa with immigrants from the Middle East and south Asia in the nineteenth century.

African Religions Today

The past hundred years have been extremely difficult for African religions. The European colonial empires on the continent worked to break up traditional tribal units and to enforce other forms of authority. With the end of colonialism following World War II,

Africa was divided into more than forty nations. The drawing of first colonial and then national boundaries tended to break up tribal life. The pressures of modernization, urbanization, a rapidly increasing population, HIV/AIDS, and chronic political instability have further changed African life. If current trends continue, it is likely that conversion to Christianity and Islam will increase. There are, however, still millions of Africans who practice traditional religions and millions more who combine traditional African beliefs and customs with those of non-native faiths.¹³ However, many of the values of these religions will continue; the Christianity and Islam emerging in Africa have distinctive African qualities.

Traditional African religions are closely linked to specific places and to tribal or ethnic groups. Modernization and urbanization have decreased the importance of place and ethnicity in the lives of many Africans. This has encouraged conversion to “world religions” which have a broader, universal message. However, African beliefs concerning the High God have both encouraged conversion and shaped African understandings of these religions. In many places belief in lesser spirits continues in the form of Christian saints and Muslim *jinn* (spirits). Beliefs in divination continue in both Christianity and Islam. Among the Woloff of West Africa, for example, it is believed that there are a large number of non-Muslim spirits who can only be understood and controlled by traditional diviners. In recent years a number of local religious movements that combine African, Christian, and/or Islamic beliefs and rituals have emerged in many parts of the continent. Similar religious movements can be found among the African American peoples of the Caribbean and South and Central America. So-called Voodoo cults, which are in reality Christianized versions of African cults focusing on ancestors and spirits, are also found in many urban areas in the United States. At the same time Africans are playing an increasingly important role in more orthodox forms of Christianity and Islam. Struggles for national independence, equality, and human rights have produced strong African and African American voices including such internationally recognized figures as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in the United States and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa.



Christianity:
Martin Luther
King, Jr.

Study Questions

1. Compare and contrast the African idea of a High God with that of Native American religions.
2. Describe the roles of the ancestors in native African religions.
3. What is the most common form of sacrifice in native African religions?
4. Discuss African puberty rites for males and females. How do these rituals prepare them for adult life?
5. What is divination? List several forms of divination in African religions.
6. How have African religions changed in the last century?
7. What are rites of passage? List several forms they take in African religions.

¹³In 1900, it was estimated that there were 9 million Christians in Africa. In 1995, there were 348,176,000 Christians, 300,317,000 Muslims, and approximately 72,777,000 followers of traditional African religions. *1998 Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998), p. 269.

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Source Material

An African Divine King

There are divine kings in many cultures. A careful look into this office and the religious concept that surrounds it often gives the reader an understanding of the supporting culture. The following is a brief description of the life (and death) of the divine king of the people of Malawi.¹⁴

Mbande is a hill on the plain of north Nyasaland with a commanding view of the surrounding country and well suited to defense. The west side is precipitous and below the scarp edge there used to be a marsh; to the north the hill is protected by a wide reach of the Lukulu River. It is a sacred place and for many generations was the home of the "divine king," the Kyungu. Like the Lwembe he was the living representative of a hero, and was selected by a group of hereditary nobles from one of two related lineages, the office alternating (if suitable candidates were available) between the two. They sought a big man, one who had begotten children and whose sons were already married, not a young man for, the nobles said, "young men always want war, and destroy the country." He must be a man of wisdom (gwa mahala) and generous in feeding his people.

The Kyungu's life was governed by taboos even more rigorous than those surrounding the Lwembe. He must not fall ill, or suffer a wound, or even scratch himself and bleed a little, for his ill health, or his blood falling on the earth would bring sickness to the whole country. "Men feared when Kyungu's blood fell on the ground, they said, 'It is his life.' If he had a headache his wives (if they loved him) told him not to mention it, they hid his illness; but if the nobles entered and found him ill they dug the grave



¹⁴Monica Wilson, *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (International African Institute, 1959), pp. 40–46.