

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN RELIGION

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Overview Several factors contribute to making the present topic almost unmanageable. Africans have always been exceptionally ‘religious,’ devoted to practices designed to increase the closeness and effectiveness of man’s relation to god. Prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam, on the scene in Africa, African religious traditions were always orally transmitted, owned no scriptures, and were therefore impossible to pin down historically. Finally each African religion tends to be intimately tied in to the society and culture in which it is formed, so that it is difficult to separate religious from social practice.

Historical perspective

Christianity, one of the three major ‘religions of the book,’ impacted North Africa during the first few Christian centuries, then made a strong presence in Ethiopia throughout the first millennium, building out the traditions of the Copts, who represented the earliest version of Christian faith. Islam, stemming like Christianity from a written tradition, and constructed around a sacred book, the *Koran*, took wing in the early 7th century C.E., moved fairly rapidly across North Africa and Spain. In the following centuries, then, like Christianity, eventually (through religious zealotry--Islam-- and missionary influences--Christianity) found itself in the early modern period firmly ensconced in Central and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Africa through which these world religions was spreading, eventually (in our time) probably to include 90% of the African population, was, until mid-twentieth century ‘independence’ from Colonialism, still largely in continuity with its own oral religious cultures, which differed widely from tribe to tribe and region to region, hugely proliferating over this continent more than three times the size of the United States. It can be imagined that the historical framework of each individual ‘religion’ is impossible to trace. Only the broadest developmental outlines can be tracked even for the widest spread of indigenous African belief systems.

Characteristics of indigenous African religions

God

With a few exceptions indigenous African religion is monotheistic. Also with a few exceptions these indigenous religions emphasize the importance of mediating spirits between God and his (almost always male) people. (This mediation will have been rendered especially important, because God is typically described as having withdrawn from the universe after having created it. Exceptions exist within this kind of ‘withdrawal’: Amma, the supreme creator for the Dogon people in Mali, brought mankind into existence by mixing the primordial material elements with ‘the vibration of his spoken word.’) While God is universally respected, as part of the ongoing process of the cosmos, he is not the stern Father God of the Abrahamic tradition, or the god with whom one ‘dialogues intimately.’ The Supreme Being Malungu, of the peoples of the Great Lakes region, in East Africa, is seen as the object of the prayers of last resort, the last place to turn for help.

Entering God’s world

Characteristically, the path to the discovery of the sacred, the healing, and the holy is through ecstasy, some kind of altered state in which one becomes preternaturally sensitive to the presence of the harmony of the universe. Dance induced trances, herbal concoctions, ritual prayers--all such conditions, invariably in a group dancing or chanting setting--these are the paths toward access to the ‘presence of the kingdom,’ whatever form that takes. This can be put negatively. For the African, firm deductive reasoning in the fashion of a St. Thomas Aquinas, who starts with the observable world and argues his way to the creator by logical stages, is unknown. While Christianity and Islam took thought-paths that could lead to *theology*, indigenous African religion (and Pentecostal African Christianity) took the path of ecstasy.

Finding your way in God’s universe

Once ‘inside the spirit,’ the African believer wanted above all to find himself in a place of harmony, where the human and the creator were at oneness with each other, or, alternatively, where the still unborn and the original creator of the universe meet, at the believer’s standpoint. The Yoruba God, Olorun, directs his secondary messengers, his *orisha*, to direct affairs on earth, and to protect the virtuous. Mulungu, of the Great Lakes peoples, directs the deities of the tribe’s many clans, to care for their members. Amma, the god of the Dogon of Mali, generates social harmony into which the believer is embraced, and in the order of the universe is thought to be sustained by *politeness*. In all these finding processes, the believer is aided by the active search provided by divination; the scoping out of the god’s will, through manifestations in the material world. There is no indigenous African religion without its system of diviners, who read signs in the stars, who study the alignment of cowrie shells or bones that have been ‘fortuitously’ scattered across a field, or who interpret the god’s voice in the thunder. In the end there is no evidence more compelling, for being in the god flow, than pregnancy and good health, and no contraindication more vivid than illness. To be ill is above all to be on bad terms with the gods.

Meeting your maker in the end: salvation

Broadly put, life tends to be experienced as part of the grand cosmic scheme of life cycles, human and natural. The virtuous man is the one who fits richly inside that higher order, venerating his ancestors, praying for the newborn. Social compliance, fitting inside one’s society, is not simply following convention, but being oneself as nature intended. It is (a nearly) hard and fast convention, of the tribe to which marriage has made this author a co-partner, that the male head of household should be buried in his/her place of birth, quite appropriately, if possible, underneath the bedroom he occupied in life.

The incorporation of world religions into the setting of indigenous religions

While on the surface, there seem few interconnecting threads between the theological religions of the book, and the indigenous religions of Africa, the impression is misleading. Both sets of belief systems target order, harmony, and salvation. Both, at a certain level, relate virtue to well-being. Finally, both systems stress the dignity of the individual as a creature of god.

Reading

Engel, Elisabeth. *Encountering Empire: African American Missionaries in Colonial Africa, 1900–1939*, Stuttgart, 2015.

Mbiti, John S. *Introduction to African Religion*, London, 1991.

Olupona, Jacob K. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2014.

Parrinder, Geoffrey. *African Traditional Religion*, London, 1974.

Parrinder, Geoffrey. *Africa's Three Religions*, London, 1976 .

Ray, Benjamin C. *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community*, New York, 1999.

Discussion questions

Why is there virtually no theological dimension to African indigenous religions? And why is *virtually* a strong word to add here? Please review the thought and work of the blind Malian philosopher-theologian, Ogotomelli.

Does the absence of writing in general, in pre-colonial Africa, explain the absence of a Holy Book, or religious scriptures? Or is the whole tenor of African religion antipathetic to the notion of such scriptures?

Does the notion of sin enter the perspective of indigenous African religions? Of conscience? Of spiritual self-examination?

What is the role of a priesthood in African religion? Is there a centralized preaching or teaching authority within the religion? If not, what gives coherence to any given religion?

What role have Christian missionaries played, in the modification of indigenous African religion? Have those missionaries tended to be 'sensitive to African values'?

Is it possible to trace the historical evolution of specific African religions? Can we track any evidence at all of such evolution? What do we know about the prehistoric forms of African religion?