# African Traditional Religions

**FOUNDED:** 200,000–100,000 B.C.E.

**RELIGION AS A PERCENTAGE OF WORLD POPULATION:** 1.3 percent

**OVERVIEW** Africa, the place of origin of all humankind, is divided into numerous political and cultural regions, reflecting its diverse range of histories, ethnicities, languages, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Its various indigenous spiritual systems, usually called African traditional religions, are many. Every ethnic group in Africa has developed a complex and distinctive set of religious beliefs and practices. Despite their seemingly unrelated aspects, there are common features to these systems, suggesting that African traditional faiths form a cohesive religious tradition.

Africans are a deeply spiritual people. Their traditional religions, however, are perhaps the least understood facet of African life. Although historically non-Africans have emphasized the multiple deities and ancestral spirits in African traditional religions, there are other notable features. For example, African cosmogony posits the existence of a Supreme Being who created the universe and everything in it. African myths frequently describe numerous lesser deities who assist the Supreme Being while performing diverse functions in the created world. Spirits may be divided into human spirits and nature spirits. Each has a life force devoid of physical form. Individuals who have died, usually ancestors in particular lineages, are the human spirits. These spirits play a role in community affairs and ensure a link between each clan and the spirit world. Natural objects, such as rivers, mountains, trees, and the Sun (as well as forces such as wind and rain), represent the nature spirits. Africans integrate this religious worldview into every aspect of life.

Although a large proportion of Africans have converted to Islam and Christianity, these two world religions have been assimilated into African culture, and many African Christians and Muslims maintain traditional spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, African cultural practices contain elements of indigenous religion. Thus, traditional African cosmologies and beliefs continue to exert significant influence on Africans today.

**HISTORY** African indigenous religions are timeless, beginning with the origin of human civilization on the continent, perhaps as early as 200,000 B.C.E., when the species *Homo sapiens* is believed to have emerged. Because they date back to prehistoric times, little has been written about their history. These religions have evolved and spread slowly for millennia; stories about gods, spirits, and ancestors have passed from one generation to another in oral mythology. Practitioners of traditional religions understand the founders of their religions to be God or the gods themselves, the same beings who created the universe and everything in it. Thus, religious founders are described in creation stories.

For indigenous African peoples "history" often refers to accounts of events as narrated in stories, myths, legends, and songs. Myth and oral history are integral elements of their culture. Such history, however, can be difficult to cross-reference with historical world events. Nevertheless, the truths and myths conveyed through an

GYE NYAME. This Ghanaian Adinkra symbol means "except for God" and symbolizes the supremacy of God. The symbol can be found throughout Ghana. It is the most popular for decoration and can often be seen printed on cloth or stamped on pottery. (THOMSON GALE)

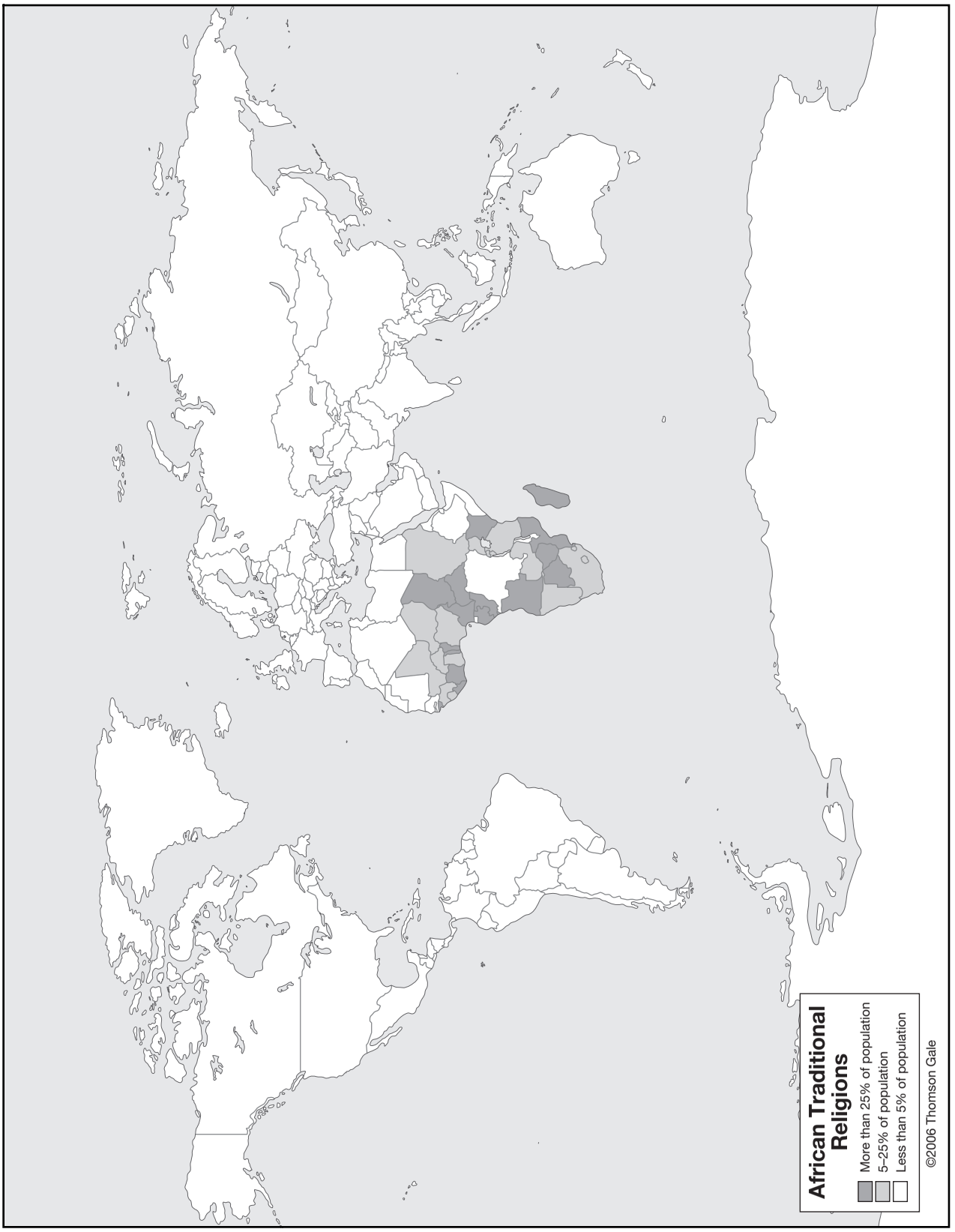
oral culture may be as authentic as those communicated through the written word. Evidence such as archaeological finds, carbon dating, and DNA has corroborated certain elements contained in African myths, legends, and narratives.

Over the years African traditional religions have increased and diminished in regional importance according to social and political changes. One of the biggest influences on African traditional religions has been outside cultures. In particular, both Islam and Christianity have affected the practice of African traditional religions. Christianity, the first world religion to appear on the continent, was taken there in about the first century C.E., spreading across North Africa. It was overtaken in the region by Islam in the seventh century—frequently by military incursion, commercial trading, and the nonviolent missionary efforts of merchants. Persian and Arab merchants introduced Islam in East Africa by trading in coastal towns up and down the eastern seaboard. Islam was readily adapted in many instances because of its compatibility, or at least tolerance of, traditional African religions. By the 1700s Islam had diversified and grown popular.

In the fifteenth century Christian missionaries became the first wave of Europeans to invade and occupy African lands. They relied on the backing of European medicinal remedies and colonial military power. By using local languages and converting Africans from their ancestral religions to Christianity, missionaries paved the way for early modernization and Western colonialism. Western colonialists negotiated and drafted treaties with African leaders, stripping Africans of their lands, depopulating the countryside, destabilizing their economies, overturning political rule, and uprooting cultural and lineage continuity. By the 1900s Christianity was firmly entrenched in most of Africa.

Today Muslims worship throughout much of Africa. The success of Islam is partially a result of its continued toleration of traditional beliefs and practices—or at least its allowance of indigenous beliefs to adapt to a form compatible with Islam. At the end of the twentieth century, Islam spread into areas such as Rwanda, where the trauma of civil war, ethnic violence, and genocide implicated Christianity and left Islam with a reputation for being on a higher moral level. On the other hand, in predominantly Muslim states such as the Sudan, Islamic fundamentalists and pro-Arab Sudanese have been implicated in the oppression and slavery of millions of Sudanese Christians and ethnic minorities.

The rapid spread of Pentecostal Christianity and fundamentalist Islam has greatly affected the role of indigenous religion in African society. African traditional religions have creatively responded to this religious onslaught by formulating new ways of survival, such as developing literature, institutionalizing the traditions, establishing associations of priests, and creating schools for the training of its priests. Moreover, they have also extended outward and influenced global culture, especially in African diaspora communities. From the 1500s to the 1900s the transatlantic slave trade took African religions to the Americas and the Caribbean. Contact with Catholicism in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti produced new forms of religious syncretism called Candomblé, Santeria, and Vodun. Since the 1980s the religions of African immigrants have influenced American culture. A new wave of conversion to indigenous African traditions has been noticeable in the United States, especially among African Americans. New forms of Yoruba religion have been emerging that are quite different from the Yoruba *orisa* traditions in Nigeria. These forms have introduced African healing practices among the black population of the United States. There are a number of West African *babalawo*s (diviners) of African origin practicing in major American urban centers, such as Atlanta, Miami, and New York City.


African Traditional Religions
More than 25% of population
5–25% of population
Less than 5% of population
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*A male fetishist carrying gear on his back at a Vodun ritual in Benin in western Africa.* © DANIEL LAINÉ/CORBIS.

The interaction between Western and traditional African religious traditions has influenced religious innovations in Africa, such as African Initiated Churches and Islamic mystical traditions (Sufism). As a result, Islam and Christianity have become Africanized on the continent, significantly changing the practice of the two traditions and leading to a distinct African expression of them.

**CENTRAL DOCTRINES** Unlike other world faiths, African traditional religions have no predominant doctrinal teachings. Rather, they have certain vital elements that function as core beliefs. Among these beliefs are origin myths, the presence of deities, ancestor veneration, and divination. African cosmology (explanation of the nature of the universe) tends to assert that there is a Supreme God who is helped by a number of lesser deities. Spirits are the connection between the living and the invisible worlds. Anyone can communicate with the spirits, but priests, priestesses, prophets, and diviners have more direct access to invisible arenas of the world.

In African traditional religions the sense of time is often described in cyclical rather than linear imagery. In the cosmology of the Dagara (an ethnic group in the Niger region of West Africa), for instance, the wheel or circle represents the cyclical nature of life as well as of the Earth. The wheel contains everything found on Earth. According to the Yoruba (an ethnic group from Nigeria), the life force that pervades all phenomena exists in an eternal cycle of complex interactions between cosmic domains; these interactions should always remain in balance. In African traditional religions the cosmogony (theory of the origin of the universe) usually describes humans appearing near the end of creation. In many creation stories God is likened to a potter who creates humans out of clay and then pours the breath of life into them.

African religions rely on the memory of oral stories. Thus, doctrine tends to be more flexible than it is in text-based religions, and it changes according to the immediate needs of religious followers. African traditional religions are a communal endeavor, and it is not required that an individual believe in every element. As in any democratic system, individuals may participate in ways that benefit their interests, their community roles, or their status as religious leaders. Because religion per-

*A group of Vodun initiates perform a ceremony with a doll inside a* kapame, *a secret ritual enclosure, near Lome, Togo.* 

meates all aspects of a traditional African culture, if an individual rejects the culture's religion, he or she may become isolated from family, friends, and the community.

Narratives about the creation of the universe (cosmogony) and the nature and structure of the world (cosmology) form the core philosophy of African religions. These narratives are conveyed in a linguistic form that scholars often refer to as myth. The term "myth" in African religions means sacred stories that are believed to be true by those who hold to them. To the African people who espouse them, myths reveal significant events and episodes of the most profound and transcendent meaning. They are not fixed, because accounts may vary from generation to generation or even among individuals who tell these stories. Myths do, however, retain similar structures and purposes: to describe the way things were at the beginning of time and to explain the cosmic order. They generally involve superhuman entities, gods, demigods, spirits, and ancestors.

The notion that myth is nonrational and unscientific, while history is critical and rational, is not always accurate, nor does it represent the outlook of practitioners of traditional religions. Many African myths deal with events that devotees consider as authentic and "real" or as symbolic expressions of historical events. Furthermore, scholars today assert that the supposedly accurate records of missionaries, colonial administrators, and the indigenous elite were susceptible to distortion. The fact that myths have endured for generations gives them their authority. Each generation expresses and reinterprets the myths, making the events revealed in them relevant to contemporary conditions.

African cosmogonic narratives explain how the world was put into place by a divine personality, usually the Supreme God in collaboration with lesser supernatural beings who act on his behalf or aid in the creative process. In several cultures a supreme deity performs creation through mere thought processes. In other cases the Supreme Being instructs lesser deities on how to create by providing them with materials to undertake

*A fetish that the tribespeople of the Belgian Congo believe wards off illness.*


the process. For instance, the Yoruba believe that the Supreme Being, Olódùmarè, designated the *orisa* (deities) responsible for creating the universe. In the creation story of the Abaluhya of Kenya, the Supreme Being, called Wele Xakaba, created the universe in a manner that resembles the seven-day creation of the world by God in the Bible, with the seventh day being a time of rest. There are myths that say the world was created out of an existing abyss or a watery universe uninhabited by animate beings. In African cosmological narratives creation is always portrayed as a complex process, whether the universe is said to have evolved from preexisting matter or from divine thought.

The Fon of Benin, in western Africa, and their neighbors, the Yoruba of Nigeria, share many elements of a highly intricate cosmology. They worship a number of the same deities—including Sango, god of thunder and lightning; Ògún, god of war and iron; Èsù, messenger of the gods; and Ifa, the god of divination. The names given to the specific deities in Benin may vary slightly from those of the Yoruba. There are similar motifs in the cosmological narratives of both cultures, though the Fon narratives are more complex than the Yoruba's.

In the Fon creation myth the Supreme Being, Mawu, is of indeterminate gender. Mawu is sometimes female and sometimes male. Mawu is often associated with a partner, Lisa. In one version of Fon cosmogony Nana Buluku, a creator god, gives birth to Mawu and Lisa. As a female, Mawu is associated with the Moon and has power over the nighttime and the western universe. Lisa, as the male, commands the Sun and occupies the eastern universe. These twin creators give birth to another set of twin deities, who in turn beget seven pairs of twin offspring. Therefore, twins are esteemed in Fon culture. Mawu-Lisa once gathered their children together to distribute what they owned among them. To the most senior set of twins Mawu-Lisa bestowed authority to rule the Earth. Another set, "Twins of Storm," retained authority to govern thunder and lightening. Representing iron and metal, the most powerful pair maintained jurisdiction over the manufacture of iron implements such as knives, hoes, arrows, and, beginning in the twentieth century, guns and automobiles. According the mythology, these twin gods took command of vital functions in developing the Fon economy: cultivating land for agriculture, building roads and paths, manufacturing tools, and improving weapons of war, farming, and hunting.

Mawu-Lisa positioned human beings in the region between the sky and the underworld, commanding humans to dwell there and to return to his own abode after a specified number of years. Mawu-Lisa also created spirits and deities, bestowing upon each a special "esoteric" ritual language through which they communicate among themselves. By ministering to deities and humans in liturgical worship, the clergy learn these rituals and languages. In this narrative Legba (messenger of the Su-

## Glossary

**Abaluhya** an ethnic group in Kenya

**babalawo** a divination specialist in Yoruba culture

**Baganda** the largest ethnic group in Uganda

**Bambara** an ethnic group in Mali

**Bantu** a large group of languages spoken in central, eastern, and southern Africa

**Ba Kongo** a group of Bantu-speaking peoples who largely reside in Congo (Brazzaville), Congo (Kinshasa), and Angola

**Ba Thonga** a group of Bantu-speaking peoples who live in the southern African countries of Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, and South Africa

**cosmogony** a theory about the creation of the universe

**cosmology** an explanation of the nature of the universe

**Dagara** an ethnic group of the Niger region of western Africa

**divination** any of various methods of accessing sacred knowledge of the deities; it often involves interpreting signs

**Edo** an ethnic group of southern Nigeria

**Fang** an ethnic group of west-central Africa

**Fon** an ethnic group of Benin

**Ifa** a form of divination that originated in West Africa

**Igbo** an ethnic group of Nigeria

**Kaguru** an ethnic group in Tanzania

**Lupupa** a subgroup of the Basongye, an ethnic group of Congo (Kinshasa)

**Manyika** an ethnic group of the southern African countries of Zimbabwe and Mozambique

**Masai** a nomadic people who inhabit Tanzania and Kenya

**Mwari** a creator god worshiped in the southern African countries of Zimbabwe and Botswana

**odu** poetic oral narratives memorized by *Ifa* diviners and recited during divination

**Olódùmarè** the Supreme Being in the religion of the Yoruba people

**opele** a divining chain used in *Ifa* divination

**orisa** in the Yoruba religious tradition, the pantheon of deities

**Yoruba** an ethnic group residing in Nigeria and parts of Benin and Togo

**Zulu** a large ethnic group in South Africa

preme Being and other gods) gained knowledge of all sacred languages of the divinities, enabling himself to initiate communication among other deities.

That other West African cultures have similar creation myths and ensuing social traditions is evidence of influence between cultures. The Winye of Burkina Faso center their creation myth on female and male twins, whom the Supreme God sent as primordial parents to establish human life in the created world. Their rebellious behavior, however, caused dismay; they resorted to acts of sorcery and refused to submit to the natural succession of generations. The female twin held back her own offspring for a year; after she finally gave birth, the children—twins themselves—rebelled against their parents by establishing themselves as an autonomous pair. Recognizing the superiority of their own children, the parents pledged to obey them, and they sacrificed a goat in acknowledgment. The story conveys the division and crisis between two generations; through sacrifice, order is restored. This myth acknowledges the importance of primordial beings and their innate procreative powers, which ultimately benefit civilization. Several other African cosmologies are also characterized by an emphasis on primordial disorder, conflict, or chaos. Though such disorder at first comprises "negative" forces, ultimately it becomes the source of a workable social universe.

In some traditional African cosmologies primordial divinities have a dispute in which subordinate gods must take sides. While the Supreme God serves as the adjudicator in such conflicts, one demigod eventually takes

command over the others. Such myths of conflict often provide humanity with unwritten guidelines for establishing institutions of morality, ethics, and behavior.

Some African societies have creation myths that correlate with their social and political organization. An example is the northern Yatenga society (of western Africa). The Nioniosse "rose up" from the underworld, and the Foulse descended from the sky. The Nioniosse command the "cult of the earth" and other rites relating to fertility, and the Foulse command the reigning monarchy, personnel, chiefs, and kings. The two complementary realms represent the world's governance and agricultural life. This myth gives credence to the importance of the underworld as the sphere that nourishes human life. Unlike Western myth, which seems partial to the reign of sky beings and portrays heaven as the abode of the Supreme Being, many African cosmologies consider the sky and the earth as equally significant spheres through which the divine create an enchanted universe.

African cosmogonic myths, which explain the origins of the universe, contain a people's conception of superhuman beings—the Supreme Being, the divinities, the demigods, and the spirits that operate in the created world. The African pantheon of gods, goddesses, spirits, and other superhuman beings is difficult for outside observers to comprehend. Deities are varied in number and complex in character. In most places in the African world it is believed that the supernatural and the natural realms interact. The lives of gods and humans become entangled through daily experiences. The gods and goddesses often populate the expression of core community beliefs, and people make frequent and daily references to them. Deities inhabit a world primarily created for humans, and they exercise tremendous influence over day-to-day human affairs. Because the spirits inhabit the natural world, no practical distinction exists between the natural and the supernatural world.

The pantheon of deities is often given a collective name; for the Yoruba of Nigeria it is *orisa,* and for the Baganda of Uganda it is *balubaale.* The intricate myths and legends describing African deities provide ample evidence of their habits, functions, powers, activities, status, and influence. In several traditions myth portrays the divinities as anthropomorphic beings who share many characteristics with humans. They can speak, they are visible, and they endure punishments and rewards. Yet they are unlike humans in that they are immortal, superhuman, and transcendent.

The most significant superhuman being is the Supreme God, who represents universality and greatness. The myths of many African cultures describe the Supreme God's global significance and place him or her high above the other deities in the pantheon. At times supreme gods are understood to be females and males who complement each other as husband and wife or brother and sister, similar to Mawu-Lisa in the religion of the Fon of Benin. In some cultures the pair's kinship bond may signify the unity of divine energy.

Although the Supreme God is a creator god, the work of creating the universe, especially when such acts entail physical labor, is often delegated to subordinates who act according to the Supreme God's instructions. The Supreme God may also be seen as a divine principle embodying the idea of life abundance and the blessings of human procreation and agricultural fertility. In many myths the Supreme God, after creating the universe, withdraws to a comfortable distance and delegates the affairs of the universe to lesser divinities. Some African groups have cults dedicated to the Supreme Being, but in general the creator does not have a special cult of devotees. This is because he occupies the realm beyond the physical abode of humans and thus remains outside their immediate influence. In some southern African religious groups, however, the Supreme God is not considered to be remote. A classic example is the regional cult of Mwari (a creator god) in western Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana. Members of the Mwari cult engage primarily in rituals that are intended to influence the economy and maintain environmental balances.

Many Africans practice ancestor veneration. Ancestors are generally the deceased elders (of either gender) who have passed from the realm of the living to that of the superhuman. They retain membership in their family, community, clan, and kin groups. Beliefs and practices of ancestor worship vary according to the local culture and religious traditions. For example, for the Komo of Congo (Kinshasa) the ancestors play a role equally prominent to that of deities. They serve as guardians of the living, and they pass down the various Komo rituals. In some other groups notions of ancestors are more expansive and may include various categories of human spirits; in others ancestors include spirits of deceased children. For the Ba Thonga people of southern Africa, among whom the ancestral system is well developed, ideas and ritual practices relating to the cult of the dead are central aspects of community life.

Communities in the Congo, like many other African cultures, often view kinship, lineage, chieftaincy, and elderhood as factors that unite the ancestors with the living. For example, in the Ba Kongo (a group of peoples who live in the Congo and Angola) and Kaguru (an ethnic group of Tanzania) societies, the elders are closest to the ancestors, and they wield much influence on how to consult and propitiate them. The elders determine what displeases the ancestors, whom to blame for the ancestors' displeasure with the living, and who will interpret the ancestors' will. Ancestors maintain a strong moral authority over the living; the elders speak for the ancestors when they intervene in and resolve conflicts. Ancestral propitiation takes many forms in Kaguru society, including cleaning the graves of the deceased, pouring libations of beer, and making offerings of flour or tobacco. Crises call for more elaborate sacrifices, such as the slaughter of chickens, goats, and sheep. In many instances the Kaguru ancestors are approached communally.

Traditional African cultures have various standards and restrictions for attaining ancestral status and spirituality, and at times even a child may become an ancestor. There is no standard or widespread characteristic of ancestorhood, but the criteria used throughout Africa share similarities. For instance, ancestors often attain their status after they have received proper burial rituals. Gender is a major factor in many traditional ancestral cultures; males rather than females have tended to benefit from ancestral ideology. The Manyika of Zimbabwe bestow ancestor status only on males, and the status is not necessarily associated with fatherhood; a childless Manyika adult male who dies may become an ancestor if a nephew includes him in his own ancestor cult. The matrilineal agricultural people of central Zambia require that males offer sacrifices to the ancestors on the right side of a doorway, while females offer sacrifices on the left. Certain sacred children may also become ancestors. The Sukuma and Nyamwezi people of Tanzania believe that twins are ancestors because multiple births indicate an excess of fertility. Women retain exclusive rights to direct any rituals related to twin ancestors, perhaps because they are responsible for their physical birth.

In the African cosmological vision death does not cease or annihilate human life—it is merely the inevitable transition to the next stage of life. It initiates the process of attaining ancestorhood. Proper burial rites and ceremonies ensure a peaceful passage. For the Bambara of Mali a death causes great anxiety, confusion, and unpredictability. It is thought that the fortune of the deceased and that of their descendants become equally volatile and that the community is thus temporarily endangered. The Bambara fear that the death of a lineage head may disturb the entire lineage. The Yoruba believe that the death of an elder who has worked diligently to provide unity and strength in the lineage causes the entire household to become empty and devoid of cohesion.

In most African communities a deceased person must be properly buried to become an ancestor. Proper burial entails a performance of elaborate funeral ceremonies by all members of the deceased's descendants. In addition, the deceased must have died a good death; Africans regard premature death that results from an accident or a "shameful disease" (such as smallpox, leprosy, and AIDS) to be a dreadful death. Most significantly, the deceased must have lived to an old age, meaning that they will have possessed wisdom and experience. When an elderly person dies, Africans traditionally avoid using the word "death." The Yoruba, for example, refer to a traumatic event or death circuitously by using metaphors such as "the elephant has fallen" (*erin wo*) or "the tiger is gone" (*ekun lo*). In avoiding the word "death," people uphold the belief that an individual is greater than death itself.

The African understanding of immortality is tied to remembrance after death. Thus, to have many children who can preserve one's memory is to secure one's immortality. Among some peoples of East Africa it is thought that a person dies only if he or she has no one to remember him or her.

In African traditional religions it is believed that ancestors sometimes experience what is generally referred to as reincarnation. The ancestors are responsible for perpetuating their lineage, not only by making possible the procreation of the living members of the lineage but also through rebirth. The Yoruba hold that children born soon after the death of grandparents or parents are reincarnated (if they are of the same sex as the deceased). For instance, a girl born after the death of a grandmother or mother is called Yetunde or Iyabo ("mother has returned"), and a boy born after the death of a grandfather or father is called Babatunde ("father has returned"). The Yoruba purport that such children normally show the traits and characteristics of the deceased. While the Kaguru have no such generic naming system, their naming patterns are closely associated with ancestral veneration. Newborns are said to come from the place of the ancestors, not necessarily in actual physical

rebirth but in terms of the particular qualities of the deceased. Through divination every Kaguru infant is given the name of the closest ancestor in time.

There is an apparent contradiction in the simultaneous belief in ancestor veneration and reincarnation. How can the ancestors live in the underworld and at the same time return to their lineage to live again? The religion of the Lupupan people of Congo (Kinshasa) illustrates how this belief is sustained in most African communities. The Lupupans believe that the body (*mbidi*) houses the spirit (*kikudi*) and that when death occurs, the spirit leaves for *elungu,* a special land that the ancestors inhabit. Wild pigs protect and guide *elungu* and run errands for the ancestors. If the living maintain a cordial relationship with the ancestors, one of the spirits returns to be reborn into the lineage. In principle, an individual's spirit can reside on Earth in another body three times, after which the cycle is complete; that individual may appear a fourth time as a fierce totemic animal, perhaps a leopard. Rebirth of the deceased spirit occurs through a grandchild (not a child, because the spirit must skip a generation). Thus, newborn grandsons take the name of their deceased grandfathers. Western notions of the afterlife came to the Lupupans in the nineteenth century with the arrival of Christianity. The Lupupans incorporated Christian ideas into their systems. While other traditional African societies may possess fewer elaborate details of reincarnation, several of them hold the view that ancestors are born into their lineage.

Another essential aspect of African traditional religion is divination, which devotees use to access the sacred knowledge of the deities and the cosmos. The process of divination allows the deities' feelings and messages to be revealed to humans. Individuals or groups of people practice divination in order to discern the meanings and consequences of past, present, and future events. Various forms of divination exist in African societies. Perhaps the most common is the appearance of signs that the elders consider to have significant meanings—for themselves, the people around them, the family, the clan, or the village. For instance, howling dogs signify the impending death of a relative. An injured toe means that a visit will be dreadful. A nightmare indicates the coming of an unpleasant event.

Evan Zuesse, a scholar of religious studies, suggests that the Fon people of Benin practice three basic types of divination: possession divination, wisdom (also called instrumental or interpretive) divination, and intuitive divination. In possession divination a spirit possesses the diviner or sacred objects. By contacting the supernatural realm of spirits, gods, ancestors, or other divine beings, the diviner attains a state of possession or shamanic trance, usually through dancing and other ritual performance. The spirit takes hold of the diviner and speaks in spirit voices, which are interpreted by the diviner's assistants. In wisdom divination the client seeks help from a diviner, who uses certain divination instruments to diagnose the cause of illness and prescribes appropriate ritual sacrifices and medicine. Intuitive divination uses the deep spiritual insight of the diviner, who has great power to reveal issues and concerns of the client.

The Yoruba, a people of southwestern Nigeria, practice perhaps the most complex African divinatory process, a classic form of wisdom divination called *Ifa,* discussed below under SACRED BOOKS. *Ifa* divination spread in West Africa between the Edo of the Benin kingdom (now in southern Nigeria) and the Fon of the Republic of Benin, as well as among the people of African descent in the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States. In *Ifa* divination a client consults a diviner (*babalawo*), who throws a divining chain (*opele*) made of nuts on a mat and then recites the message of the *Ifa* deity who appears. Clients listen to the poetic recital and identify aspects of it that relate to their problem. A precise response emerges through additional inquiry, and the diviner prescribes appropriate sacrifices.

**MORAL CODE OF CONDUCT** Various African cultures have developed intricate sets of ethical customs, rules, and taboos. Many societies believe that their morals originated with God and the ancestors and were imparted to humans as elements of God's creation of the world. These moral values are thus embedded in the religious ethos and cosmology. Because the gods and ancestors created the society's ideals, people are highly reluctant to stray from them. The Igbo people of Nigeria's Owerri region traditionally believe that Alà, goddess of Earth, together with Amadióhà, god of thunder and lightning, oversee the essential aspects of village life. As goddess of peace and mother of her people, Alà provides and protects them, deriving her great strength from the land. If offended, however, she can exhibit extremely violent reactions. Any crime is considered to defile the land and thus to offend Alà; violations include incest, adultery, larceny, birthing abnormal children, hostility, kidnaping, and murder.

In most traditional African cultures morals are of two classes—those that govern individual conduct and those that govern social and community relations. Morals that govern social conduct and community relations, and thus protect the group, tend to be rigorous, because the welfare of the group is highly valued. Fundamental human rights are often seen as important not for the sake of individuals but for the collective survival of the group. Community morals govern the family unit, from maternal and paternal relatives to extended families, clans, and lineages. Family members must adhere to specific roles, privileges, and rights. Because they regulate an infinitely larger number of relationships and personal interactions, morals governing the community are complex. To promote the welfare of communities, societies have established taboos and consequences for breaking them. Marriage to a close relative, incest, and disrespect of property and life are taboo. It is forbidden in most places for the young to disobey the elders. This is because Africans assume that respecting elders is a way of acknowledging the wealth of their experiences, their contributions to community growth, and that they are close to the world of the ancestors.

Many African societies anchor their moral values on belief in the ancestors, who are regarded as the ultimate custodians of family mores. Breaking the laws of the community offends the ancestors, who may wreak disaster upon the offender and community as well. The ancestors often reward devotion to ancestral traditions by bestow blessings upon members of their lineages.

Specific deities are ordained by the Supreme God as custodians of rectitude. Ògún, for example, is the Yoruba god of justice. The gods are concerned with many issues in the day-to-day life of the people, including their fertility, agricultural production, governance, and health and well-being. The gods watch over a person's values, morals, and sense of justice.

Although African religions have not embarked on a systematic theology, the myths, rituals, and stories of the gods and ancestors point to a profound statement on moral justice. The gods and ancestors are guardians of morality. They profess habits of truth, justice, honesty, good character, and diligence. They reward good deeds and punish bad deeds. A number of the traditions talk about judgment, through which evil deeds are punished and good deeds are rewarded. Africans believe that punishment may be communal or may pass from one generation to another. Lineage or familial misfortune signifies punishment for the past sins of members of the lineage. Certain antisocial behaviors, such as theft, witchcraft, and sorcery, are taboo, and offenders may suffer punishment of death. Because African religions focus on contemporary worldly salvation, Africans believe that bad character is punished in this world.

## Sacred Kingship

African religious leaders include the sacred kings and chiefs who often serve as both spiritual and community leaders. Kingship is integral to African belief systems for at least two reasons. First, in the origin myths of several peoples, such as the Baganda of Uganda and the Edo of Nigeria, the first king or chief of the community was endowed with the sacred power of the Supreme Deity. At times rulers have been described as gods or as endowed with God's divinity. Second, the physical well-being of a king reflects the well-being of his people, including their agricultural and hunting life. Indeed, in ancient African kingdoms, whenever the power of the king waned, he committed suicide to save the community.

In modern African societies, such as that of the Zulu of South Africa, the king's roles as ruler, judge, and ritual specialist are often critical in maintaining a functioning society. Even with the advance of literacy and the impact of Islam and Christianity in Africa, the king continues to function as a sacred canopy under which foreign traditions are subsumed and celebrated.

**SACRED BOOKS** Africans who follow a traditional religion rely on no scriptures, canonical texts, or holy books to guide them. In African traditional religions guidance is provided through myths, which are handed down orally. Elders, priests, and priestesses have served as guardians of the sacred traditions. Throughout Africa innumerable myths explain the creation of the universe, how man and woman appeared, the origin of the culture, and how people arrived in their current location. Oral narratives define morals and values for traditional religions, just as written texts do for religions that have sacred books. Because of the oral nature of African sacred

texts, the faithful who transmit this knowledge are considered sacred.

Among many African ethnic groups, however, some sets of oral narratives exist that serve as sacred texts. A classic example is *Ifa* divination, which is popular among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria. The *Ifa* corpus is a large body of poetic oral narratives that are memorized by diviners and recited during divination performances. There is hardly a topic or issue that *Ifa* fails to address.

To learn about divine will and directives, an *Ifa* diviner (*babalawo*) uses 16 specially selected palm nuts or a divining chain (*opele*) made of 8 half palm nuts tied into a chain. The diviner holds the chain by the middle and throws it on a mat, making a *U* shape, so that four nuts fall on each side of the mat. The nuts expose either convex or concave sides, thus displaying 16 possible forms of *Ifa* signature. Each signature stands for a symbol called an *odu,* each of which corresponds to a chapter (also called an *odu*) containing several verses of oral poems. The diviner then recites the *odu* that appear in the divination castings. After the recitation the client tells the diviner if any of the verses is relevant to the crisis. At this stage the client may reveal to the diviner the nature of his or her inquiry. The diviner recalls and interprets an appropriate text and, through further questioning, arrives at a definitive cause of the client's quest. The diviner prescribes a remedy, which is usually a sacrificial ritual, but in a case of grave illness medicinal herbs may offer a cure.

During their long periods of apprenticeship diviners memorize *Ifa* verses, which may be as long as 256 *odu.* The message and sacrifices contained in *Ifa* verses are a genre of oral tradition; they preserve the Yoruba religious worldview through myths, proverbs, songs, and poetry.

Highly trained diviners have largely been responsible for memorizing and transmitting important historical and cultural events to the living generation. Because there are no sacred books, however, it is impossible to know what traditional religions were like 500 or 1,000 years ago. Oral myths elude permanent display on paper, stone, or other media; African traditional religions remain changeable according to the needs of their followers. Accordingly, if religious believers no longer find a belief or ritual useful for daily spiritual life, it may easily be set aside forever.

**SACRED SYMBOLS** African art is a central part of traditional religious expression. It is known worldwide for its powerful ability to represent abstract ideas and spiritual forces. African artists produce sacred icons and symbols of traditional religions in an enormous array of forms, both abstract and representational. Traditional artists typically carve images that express the powers of God, demigods, ancestors, and spirits as intermediaries between deities and humans. A royal stool may depict powerful animals such as leopards and tigers. Practitioners of African traditional religions are generally familiar with the symbols and icons, but often only a few trained individuals can interpret the significance of such symbolic and iconic forms, which are used to imply religious meaning in initiation, divination, and secret societies.

In addition to abstract forms, many religious artists borrow from forms found in nature—such as insects, trees, leafs, and animals—to produce intricate design motifs. Common animal motifs are the chameleon, centipede, butterfly, lizard, snake, tortoise, and fish. Many species of birds, including the ostrich, vulture, dove, and heron, inspire artists. Cultural objects and status symbols—such as an amulet, royal crown, staff, divination sign, or dance wand—often inspire designs. Such designs are incorporated into everyday objects; these may be a writing board, comb, game board, or scissors. In certain regions of Africa traditional hairstyles have their own religious significance. A male priest or a traditional ruler may wear a long hairstyle signifying a female deity, thereby assuming the persona of the deity and establishing a special connection with her. Shrines, religious objects, and sacred places are decorated with many forms, shapes, and colors to express religious concepts.

**EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS** While there have been great male and female religious leaders throughout Africa's history, none can be elevated above others in their importance to religious history. In indigenous traditions the leaders are the mythic beings and culture heroes who were responsible for founding empires, civilizations, clans, and lineages that later formed the core of the religioethnic traditions of their peoples. Such mythic figures and culture heroes include Oduduwa in Nigeria, Shaka the Zulu in South Africa, and Osei Tutu in Ghana.

Many people are involved in religious leadership, and a single religion can have priests, priestesses, sacred kings and queens, prophets, prophetesses, and seers, all of whom have been important religious leaders throughout the ages. This "democratization" of religious responsibility is in line with a general tendency of avoid-

ing the concentration of spiritual powers in the hands of a single individual. Leaders in African traditional religions are the people who impart religious wisdom and guidance to believers. African societies do not clearly delineate an individual's religious title. A priest can be a diviner, a king can be a seer, and a prophet can be a priest and a diviner. Even if a person has a number of spiritual skills, however, he or she may concentrate efforts in a single area. Various roles carry distinct names in West African languages. A priest connected with a god is referred to as an *obosõmfo, vodunõ, olorisa,* and *atama* in Twi, Fon, Yoruba, and Igbo, respectively. A seer in these respective languages is an *okõmfo, bokonõ babalawo,* and *amoma.* Similarly, the name for a medicine healer is *sumãnkwafo, amawato, onisegun,* and *dibia.*

Religious leaders play numerous roles in a traditional African society. Many offer sacrifices or make verbal demands on the behalf of believers. The most powerful religious leaders are spirit mediums, members of a family or clan who are responsible for communication between an ancestor and his or her descendants. Diviners are vital for communicating with the spirit world. People consult diviners for any number of issues, but the most common reasons are for a misfortune, such as sickness, death, or calamity; spirits are likely to have knowledge about the causes of a misfortune. Diviners have vast accumulations of secret knowledge and are highly intuitive about human nature.

Priests and priestesses are natural leaders because they are in direct service to God and dedicate themselves to the deities for life. The oldest man of the family or community is often a priest, because he is the closest to the dead and has lived the longest life. In a village one priest usually leads all other priests. A head priest is chosen by his predecessor; otherwise, village elders or a chief's council make this decision.

According to traditional belief, there are powerful spirits who, acting through spirit mediums, have been involved in historical events in Africa. For instance, Mbuya (grandmother) Nehanda, a spirit medium in Zimbabwe, played an important role in mobilizing people in the fight against for political independence beginning in the late nineteenth century. Nehanda, considered an incarnation of an oracle spirit, was eventually hanged by colonial authorities in 1898. Nevertheless, throughout the twentieth century her spirit, speaking through other spirit mediums, continued to work closely with the freedom fighters in the struggle for independence.

Contemporary African religious leaders include those who have been interested in reviving traditional religion. One of the foremost of these is Wande Abimbola (born in 1936), who in 1987 was selected by the elder *babalawo*s in Nigeria to be the *awise awo agbaye* (chief spokesperson of Ifa and Yoruba religion and culture). In 2003 Abimbola was appointed the adviser to the president of Nigeria on culture and tradition.

**MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS** Numerous scholars in diverse fields of interest carry out studies of African religions. Major scholarly research about African traditional religions had a late start. In the fourteenth century "outsiders" began to inquire into the nature of African cultures and religions. Muslim and European colonial traders, travelers, slavers, missionaries, military personnel, mercenaries, and administrators frequently recorded naive accounts of African cultural customs, traditions, and religions. Although their inquiries were fraught with bias, some outsiders were more reliable than others.

Much of the early authorship was conducted by anthropologists working for colonial governments or by Christian missionaries. By the 1930s colonial governments in Africa had opened several colleges (as offshoots of European institutions) across the continent. Although the standards for these colleges were high, the curriculum did not include the study of European or African religions. During the 1940s and 1950s departments of religious studies were created in universities in Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and Sierra Leone. Colonial offices continued to govern universities and colleges. Departments of religious studies did not appear in East Africa until the 1960s. In West Africa colleges gained autonomy during the struggle for independence in the 1960s. With autonomy came a revitalized study of religions, which recognized the religious pluralism of independent countries. The emphasis on Christian studies that had long dominated the religious studies field was replaced by an emphasis Islamic studies and African traditional religions.

The early African scholarship of J.B. Danquah (1895–1965) from Ghana and J. Olumide Lucas (from Nigeria) in the first part of the twentieth century produced interesting studies of African indigenous religion. In the 1940s Africans entered into the scholarly discourse on African indigenous religions. For example, John Mbiti from Kenya, the most prolific of the African scholars, challenged the Eurocentric notion that Afri-

cans had no notion of a Supreme God. Mbiti's work inspired numerous studies on God in African religions.

Among the scholars responding to accusations that Africans lack a notion of God was E. Bolaji Idowu, who did research on the Yoruba Supreme God, publishing *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* in 1962. Idowu, with J.O. Awolalu and Geoffrey Parrinder (an English Methodist minister who taught religion in Nigeria), put in place a structure for the study of African religions that later scholars adapted for their own studies. These three scholars established the idea of the centrality of a Supreme God surrounded by myriad lesser gods. Some of the academic priests, including Parrinder, Father Placid Temple, and Zaireois V. Mulago, were influenced by the inclusive views of liberal theology developed by Protestant and Catholic academic theologians in North American and European universities. They began to abandon their doctrinal, orthodox, and christocentric views of African religion.

From the postcolonial years in the 1960s to the early 1990s, the study of African religions entered a mature phase. During this period many scholars of African religious studies were passionately nationalistic. In the forefront was E. Bolaji Idowu. Perhaps the finest critic of African religious scholarship was Ugandan writer and anthropologist O. p'Bitek. In *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971) p'Bitek wrote that the viewing of African religions through Euro-Christian spectacles should cease.

The study of African religions today is a global phenomenon, with methodologies and theoretical approaches that range from collecting ethnographic data to addressing the works of missionaries who try to convert the indigenous people to Christianity. During the 1980s and 1990s many African scholars began to study abroad. The overwhelming majority of scholars in religious studies departments are now Africans.

**ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE** In contrast to structured Western religions, traditional African religions are organized with relatively little concern for formal structure. African religions rely on no single individual as a religious leader but instead depend upon an entire community to do religious work. Priests, priestesses, diviners, elders, chiefs, kings, and other authority figures may perform sacred and ceremonial rituals. Depending on the kind of religious activity, various religious authorities may preside over specific rituals.

Africans do, however, precisely define the structure of their cosmos. From greatest to least significance, African traditional religions begin the hierarchy with a being or god who remains supreme. Next are divinities and ancestors, who represent the invisible world. Then there are priests and holy persons, who are intermediaries between the seen (the living) and the unseen worlds. Finally, living humans remain for a time in the visible world. Members of an African religious tradition are often divided into the initiated and the uninitiated. The initiated are priests and priestesses and may hold titles within the cult. They carry out specialized duties. The uninitiated are the rest of the members of the religious group, who have not performed any major initiation rituals that qualify them to serve in the group's inner circles.

**HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES** Every African community and ethnic group has its own religious places, which can take several forms. Some are fabricated, some are found in nature, and others are natural but altered in some fashion. Some structures are built for specific religious purposes, to protect the faithful from inclement weather, or to protect religious objects from the elements. Larger buildings, such as temples, function exclusively for religious purposes; there are numerous temples for the worship of various deities. Temples are located all over the continent, especially among the ethnic groups in southern Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda. In some cases kings, queens, and other nobility are buried in temples. Some harbor shrines and ancestor graves.

Shrines, the most common religious structure, exist throughout Africa. Shrines may be exclusively for family members or for public use. They usually contain revered religious objects and are used for religious activities such as pouring libations, performing rituals, saying prayers, and making offerings. Shrines are usually the center of a family's religious life and are the connection between the visible and invisible world. Priests or priestesses watch over both community shrines and family shrines.

Altars are small structures where offerings can be placed and sacrifices performed. They may be in shrines or temples, or they may stand on their own. Shrines and altars are most often found in natural spaces or in locations that are considered powerful places for connecting with the invisible. A taboo frequently restricts the kinds of materials used for building shrines and altars. Often

only local materials found in the environment may be used to build these structures.

Shrines are often established above familial and ancestral gravesites; the grave itself may also serve as a shrine. Families memorialize deceased relatives and lineages at their gravesites. At such shrines the living may communicate with the departed person; the family may also convey messages to God through the deceased. Graves play a more important religious role for farming communities than for pastoralists, who are constantly moving from one place to another. The location of graves varies from group to group. In most West African communities burials take place on pieces of land within the family's compound; these are regarded as secured places where the dead will be at peace. Graves may also be located in a sacred forest where the spirits of the ancestors concentrate. A bad death (suicide or murder) may cause the victim to be buried in the "waste bush" to discourage the spirit from reincarnating or disturbing the peace of the living.

Natural religious sites are vast in number, and every traditional African culture has many. These sites include forests (or parts of forests), rivers, lakes, trees, mountains, waterfalls, and rocks. They are thought to be the meeting places between heaven and earth and between visible and invisible worlds. Thus, they are important places to communicate with spirits of the dead, with God, and with the heavenly world. The faithful usually designate natural places as sacred sites based on historical or special events. Such natural spaces are usually set aside from everyday uses such as grazing cattle, washing clothes, and growing crops. They are used only for ceremonies, rituals, prayers, and sacrifices. Òsun Grove in Òsogbo, Nigeria, is a good example of an environmental landmark that has been moved into the realm of the sacred.

**WHAT IS SACRED** The African worldview is based on a belief that every living and inanimate object is sacred on some level. Some are deemed more sacred than others. Devotees of traditional religions recognize domestic and wild animals as sacred and full of great power. Domestic animals such as dogs, goats, and roosters are often used for sacrificial purposes, and certain of their body parts—such as feathers, nails, entrails, horns, beaks, and blood—are used as offerings and for divining.

Many wild animals are sacred because they have wisdom and powers, because they are believed to be inhabited by spirits, and because it is said that in some cases they were sent to earth by God to communicate with humans. An example is a story among Zulus in which a chameleon and then a lizard are sent to Earth by God to tell men that he has arranged death to be a part of the cycle of human life. There is a continuing belief about the sacredness of lizards and chameleons in Zulu culture. Devotees attach great importance to animals because, at any moment, an animal may be preparing to deliver a message to humans from anywhere in the spirit world.

Various herbs and plants contain special powers that are useful for religious purposes. Certain herbs are sacred, and those priest specialists who have deep knowledge of how to use them are called herbalists. In addition to having medicinal uses, the herbs carry symbolic properties and qualities that make them appropriate for religious uses.

**HOLIDAYS/FESTIVALS** In traditional African cultures festivals are scheduled to occur during major rites of passage, including birth, circumcision, coming-of-age initiation, marriage, and death. Many communities maintain elaborate calendars of festivals that run throughout the year. Seasonal festivals commemorate annual events such as field preparation, planting, harvesting, hunting and fishing periods, and the New Year. Other festivals celebrate victory at war, the coronation of kings or chiefs, and changes in leadership. Community festivals are designed to purify villages or larger communities (ridding them of evil and bad fortune), to carry on life-sustaining activities successfully, and to bring harmony to the village. Festivals are often accompanied by sacrifices and offerings to ancestors and deities, who, it is believed, then transmit information to God.

It is common for the various African gods and deities to have their own yearly festivals. Deities who usually do not garner much attention during daily and weekly worship schedules often draw massive crowds during their annual festivals. These are usually colorful affairs with dancing, music, eating, drinking, praying (and other religious activities), wearing masks and costumes, and general merrymaking.

In African traditional religions certain days are declared by community leaders to honor the gods. During such days ordinary community activities—fishing, farming, and buying or selling at the market—are prohibited to honor the deities. In festivals commemorating the deeds of the gods, ancestors, and sacred kings, devo-

## Racism in the Early Study of African Religions

The first academic studies of African traditional religions were written in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries by Muslim and European scholars. Trained in the new method of "fieldwork"—which entailed observing participants and speaking the language of the community—these anthropologists worked for their governments. Their studies avoided describing African cultures in indigenous terms. They were expected to assess colonial projects, predict the behavior of the natives, distinguish between rumor and fact, and develop mechanisms for colonial command and control.

Early scholars viewed African indigenous religions as "primitive," comparing them adversely with European Christian beliefs. At this time two main schools of thought prevailed. The first questioned the origin of African civilizations and religions. Scholars attempted to link African cultures with external sources—for instance, suggesting that sub-Saharan black Africans had come from the Middle East or Egypt. This notion built upon evolutionary theories that posited that cultures gradually evolve, becoming "less primitive" over time. The second school put forward a diffusionist, or "contact," theory of development to explain sophisticated African belief systems and artifacts (such as exquisite bronzes and terracotta sculptures). Westerners deemed Africans incapable of producing such ideas and objects. The diffusionist theory held that religious ideas of the Mediterranean region had proliferated, eventually reaching the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. A concept that gained wide currency under the theory of diffusion was the erroneous idea that Africans lacked a Supreme God and instead were polytheists. These two schools reflect an insidious racist ideology that influenced the initial study of African religions.

tees take time off from farming, hunting, and fishing to dedicate themselves completely to celebrating with the community or region. They observe certain taboos, such as abstinence from sex, or they make pilgrimages to sacred forests, rivers, and mountains in honor of the deities.

**MODE OF DRESS** Modes of dress in African traditional religions vary depending upon the kind of devotee, geographical location, and a person's age. Despite this, certain kinds of clothes, accessories, and permanent or temporary bodily accoutrements distinguish devotees from others. Priests and followers often wear white clothes as a sign of purity. Deities are usually represented by signs or symbols on clothing or the skin.

Colors adorning the body identify devotees and carry meaning. For instance, Yoruba devotees of an *orisa* (deity) wear red and white marks on their foreheads. Painting the body with white chalk or another substance for ceremonial purposes is also a common way to identify a devotee's beliefs or stage of life. Priests usually carry signs of their social status, including horsehair whisks, brass figures, embellished staffs, jewelry, diamonds, gold, feathers, or priestly stools or chairs; they may also wear white chalk on the body.

Scarification or tattoo is a permanent mode of cultural adornment signifying identification with beliefs; motifs are often based on abstract designs, leaf forms, and totemic flora and fauna. Although most body art carries little association with Ògún (the Yoruba god of iron), raised-scarification design has been associated with Ògún because Yoruba body artists traditionally use iron implements to create intricate patterns and shapes on the skin. The palm tree design on a person's body signifies identification with Ògún. This is because traditional weavers manufacture textiles from palm fronds and also because Ògún's preferred food and drink come from the oil palm tree.

**DIETARY PRACTICES** In traditional African cultures family members habitually offer food and drink to their ancestors. Such offerings are often placed in or on family shrines, which are usually located behind the family house or compound. All kinds of seeds and the most delicious parts of domesticated crops are appropriate for ritual offerings. Materials may be ground into powders and mixed with other substances. Offerings may be done for purification, for protection from adverse forces, and for divination.

According to African traditional beliefs, deities normally prefer certain foods and drinks and abstain from others. In Yoruba religion, for example, each deity has

likes and dislikes, and care is taken to respect the deities' preferences. Òrìsà-Nlá loves snails cooked in shea butter, Òrúnmílá prefers rat and fish, and Èsù loves rooster. These deities consume no other foods, except perhaps kola nuts, a standard ritual ingredient in many African cultures. Òrìsà-Nlá disdains palm wine, and Èsù dislikes *adin* (palm-kernel oil). It is taboo to bring unfavorable foods near the shrines, and devotees of these deities refrain from partaking of these foods. Because of their personal associations with a divinity, priests and certain religious specialists honor food taboos; it is also thought that, by doing so, they can perform rituals effectively for observers of these restrictions.

Accordingly, dietary prohibitions and peculiarities are associated with the deceased and the diets of those who inhabit the heavenly world. Eating habits and diet differ vastly among regions of Africa. They are based on seasonal availability and environmental, social, cultural, and religious differences. Dietary restrictions take place for various reasons, including a person's stage of life, gender, or social class. A twin in Yoruba culture is forbidden to eat the meat of the colobus monkey, because the Yoruba believe that twins have kinship relationships with them.

**RITUALS** Ritual and ceremony are the most important entry points to understanding the religious life of African communities. To the observer of religious practices, rituals are more visible than mythic narratives, but rituals often relate to myths by conveying and reinforcing the meanings and values that communities hold sacred. Ritual can have an extremely broad meaning that refers to many aspects of human life.

All traditional religious practices incorporate ritual, although the forms vary greatly from region to region, ethnic group to ethnic group, and even from individual to individual within the same religious tradition. Not every member of society performs all rituals; instead, a particular ritual may be prescribed for certain members of a community. In hierarchical African societies a few skilled elites who possess status, knowledge, authority, and power are chosen to use sacred ritual icons. In nonhierarchical societies individuals share authority and power equally.

In spite of their differences, African religions share certain common features, especially in their rituals and ceremonies. They always involve larger groups of people or entire communities. For example, agricultural rituals function communally to benefit the group. Great numbers of Africans continue to work in subsistence, cash crop, and other agricultural economies, and they have preserved spiritual practices and sacred rituals to induce the gods to ensure rains, successful harvests, and abundant agricultural production. Rituals related to rain are considered communal, because the availability of water affects the lives of so many. Devotees of African traditional religions often perform rituals to induce rain; such rituals feature dancing, singing, and chanting.

Some religious rituals involve the devotees offering the gods and ancestors sacrificial animals, libations of water or alcohol, or small amounts of favored food. Sacrificial rituals and festivals in which food is shared reinforce the communal bond between the participants, the ancestors, God, and the lesser deities. Much social ritual takes place at shrines, temples, and altars. These are rituals performed to cement the bond of unity among a community or to celebrate the achievements of individual members of the group. On important occasions (such as hunting expeditions, healing ceremonies, and rites of passage), the faithful honor their gods, ancestors, and spirits with ritual festivals, ceremonies, divination, and animal sacrifice. In the case of drought, flooding, volcanoes, famine, illness, and other disasters, devotees offer a sacrificial animal to appease the spirit deity thought to be responsible for the calamity.

African religious traditions and ritual practices have been passed down from generation to generation for centuries; thus, practitioners experience history in every religious ritual that is performed. Although ritual has changed over time according to the social, political, environmental, and spiritual needs of individuals, it continues to be a real connection with the past—a connection that Africans take seriously as they pass their culture from one generation to the next.

**RITES OF PASSAGE** The primary rites of passage in African religious life are birth and naming, puberty, marriage, achieving elder status, and death. Such rites provide a transition from one age to the next. Puberty rituals signify the coming of age, when elders reveal to the younger generation the ancestral secrets of deep knowledge. Marriage rituals signify the betrothal of individuals to each other, to the lineage, and to the community. Although the rituals marking elderhood are more rare today, certain cultures, such as the Owo Yoruba (a subgroup of the Yoruba people of Nigeria) and the Masai (of Tanzania and Kenya), celebrate transition to the honored elder status.

Personal or individual rituals often surround events that happen in everyday life. Birth, transition to adulthood, marriage, and death are four of the most prominent kinds of life events celebrated with religious ritual. The rites for these stages often contain aspects of both communal and personal ritual. The Fang of Central Africa retain a personal ritual associated with birth, the *biang ndu,* or *biang nzí* (sometimes called the "roof medicine" ritual). If delivery becomes difficult, the father of the child climbs onto the roof of the house to a spot above the mother's belly. After piercing the thatched roof with a hollow banana stem, he pours medicinal water through the stem directly onto her pregnant belly. Only the father can perform the *biang ndu,* which is witnessed by family members and neighbors.

In African cultures celebrating the transition from childhood to adulthood takes many forms. Initiation ceremonies occur most commonly during puberty. There is much ritual involved with initiation, which is a time for the younger generation to learn how to be contributing members of society. A youth undergoes the rituals in seclusion with children of the same age. Participants are taught about their people's beliefs, history, and traditions as well as about raising a family, the secrets of marriage, and other practical information. Initiation is a deeply religious affair and a sign of unity with the larger community and the ancestors. Before, during, and after initiation ceremonies, the community offers many prayers and sacrifices to God; they ask for blessings and good luck for the youths undergoing the arduous process. Female and male circumcisions are often a part, but not the focus, of initiation rites. The ceremonies are usually performed apart from the community to preserve an aura of mystery for initiates. Initiation often takes place for several days or months in auspicious natural locations, such as forests or grasslands, where the initiates are afforded closer contact with the invisible realm, the spirits, and God.

Outside observers and anthropologists have written many descriptions of traditional African initiation rites. One of the best, however, is the account by Malidoma Patrice Somé (born in 1956) of his own initiation as a member of the Dagara of Burkina Faso. As a young boy he had been kidnaped by a French Jesuit missionary; he was initiated when he returned to his village at age 20. The initiation Somé describes is full of associations with nature. Male initiates leave the village, and while they are still in the presence of family and friends, they remove their clothing. Nakedness is common in traditional African cultures. There is no shame associated with it, because it is perceived as an expression of a relationship with the spirits of nature.

Death is one of the most important events of an African community, and often there are extended and complex rituals associated with it. With death comes a permanent physical separation between the deceased and the living, and ritual helps to accentuate this transition. There is great variation in the traditions and rituals surrounding death. Attendants use natural objects to wash, clothe, and bury the body, which is often covered in animal skins, leather, cotton, bark cloth, or leaves. These objects emphasize that the body, conceived in the earth, returns to the earth. The deceased person's soul remains a presence in the lives of individuals and must be respected by the living. In traditional African culture the world of the ancestors and the abode of the dead is understood as a sphere beyond the realm of the living. In some societies this realm, called *ilˋ*, is considered to exist within the earth itself.

**MEMBERSHIP** Requirements for membership in an African indigenous religion have varied according to local traditions. Typically, traditional cults limited membership solely to birthright. Members of Igbo, Masai, or Edo groups, for example, belonged to and practiced the religion of their lineage, clan, and family. With the advent of Islam and Christianity in Africa—and the widespread conversion to these two monotheistic traditions—the numbers of adherents to African religions dwindled. Devotees of traditional religions awakened to the possibility of losing their faith, and to compensate they extended the criteria for membership. Most traditional African religious cultures have thus become more inclusive.

Throughout the centuries of transatlantic slave trading, Africans took their religious practices to the Americas and the Caribbean. The large numbers of Africans living in North, Central, and South America introduced enduring forms of African religious culture through music, dance, festivals, and martial arts. This occurred especially in Brazil, Peru, Cuba, Trinidad, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and other locations where African populations were extensive. Traditional devotees in the New World realized that, to preserve their religious heritage, they had to accept converts.

As African religious cultures spread from Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, and other places of the diaspora to the United States, new forms emerged that catered to the

spiritual needs of many peoples. Perhaps the most fascinating of these pioneer movements are the Yoruba-inspired African American traditions. Beginning in the late twentieth century hundreds of African Americans embraced Yoruba traditions by founding the Kingdom of Oyotunji African Village near the city of Sheldon, South Carolina. It was named after its namesake Yoruba kingdom in West Africa.

**RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE** African traditional religions do not proselytize because traditional religious expression is accepted as unique to an ethnic group. Religion is so intimately tied to place that African religions do not give themselves easily to the influence of exogenous groups. African cultures are, however, often flexible enough to absorb values and traditions from other religious belief systems. Competing indigenous religions may incorporate useful or similar aspects of each other. The most common religions that have been incorporated into traditional belief systems are Christianity and Islam. Even if followers of indigenous African religions convert to Christianity of Islam, they often continue to practice their traditional rituals. This is because, for them, Christianity lacks the breadth to signify all their religious feelings, values, and beliefs. Islam has, overall, been more compatible with and tolerant of African traditional religions and cultural practices. Ancestor veneration, polygamy, circumcision, magic, and beliefs in spirits and other divinities are common in both popular Islam and African traditional religions.

Practitioners of African traditional religions have been victims of conversion and intolerance. Adherents to Western religions have sometimes viewed African religions as "inferior." In his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chinua Achebe (born in 1930) discusses the ethnic slurs used in his native Igbo language; Christians refer to followers of traditional religions as "nonbelievers, heathens, and lowly people (*ndi nkiti*)." In Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani (Nigeria and Niger) societies, Muslims call traditional believers *keferi* (unbelievers) and people of *jahiliyya* (local and inferior tradition).

**SOCIAL JUSTICE** Major social concerns for followers of African traditional religions include poverty and the environment. A contemporary response to the crisis of poverty in African villages is the linking of development with ethnoreligious identity. In Nigeria, Ghana, and other parts of West Africa, for instance, village and town associations meet for purposes of economic unity and social development. Although these groups are no longer connected to the worship of traditional gods (most of them have converted to Islam and Christianity), they have established a platform that involves the reinvention of traditional value systems such as sacred kingship, totemic concepts, and old tribal gods reimagined in modern secular idioms. By invoking tribal myth and historic symbols, they galvanize members of their communities at home and abroad to contribute to the economic growth of villages, towns, and communities. In this way Africans have been responding to a crisis using their own metaphysical and epistemological worldview.

In many African societies deceased souls live in forests, rivers, riverbanks, hills, or other natural places. The living must avoid and respect the resting places of the dead. Communities often preserve these sacred natural places from exploitation and mining by establishing certain land-use restrictions. Thus, traditional funerary ritual in many cases has been effective in inspiring wise use of natural resources. Without a natural landscape and the reverence for the spirituality and mystery to be found in nature, much of the power of African culture would be greatly diminished.

**SOCIAL ASPECTS** In traditional African cultures marriage, raising children, and fulfilling familial obligations are religious duties. Marriage agreements usually involve both sets of parents of the couple to be married. Binding the couple is accompanied by exchanging gifts, which is largely a way of thanking the parents of the bride or groom for bringing up their child in a good manner. The gifts do, however, hold some local legal weight, because if a marriage does not last, it is expected that the value of gifts be returned to the family who gave them.

Religious traditions reinforce the idea that family members must adhere to specific roles. Younger generations must care for their elders, children must obey their parents and elders, and parents must teach, provide, and care for their children. At times parents must care for their sibling's offspring.

**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES** In contemporary Africa the persistence of sacred practices is a source of conflict between devotees of African religions and outsiders. When outsiders evaluate indigenous cultures and religions, they often judge practices and beliefs as controversial. Western religious cultures regard many aspects of African religions—such as witchcraft, ritual killing of ani-

mals, female circumcision, polygamy, and approaches to gender relations—as peculiar compared with Western cultural practices. Among the adherents of an African religious tradition, however, these practices generally do not cause controversy.

Traditional religion in any culture affirms the identity of that culture, provides a source of knowledge, and defines a people's existence. Religion provides an education for individuals and is a rich source of cultural knowledge about many different subjects. A crisis of identity has been created in Africa as Africans' own indigenous sources of knowledge are steadily replaced by global values dictated by Western capitalism. Another issue is conversion to Christianity and Islam in Africa, which has not only created conflicts between indigenous religions and these two traditions but also set Christianity and Islam against each other.

**CULTURAL IMPACT** African traditional religions and African arts dovetail. Religion gives meaning and value to all forms of African artistic expression, including literature, music, visual art, and dance. Because indigenous societies are mainly nonliterate, oral traditions expressed in poetry, proverbs, and mythic narratives are sources of African literary traditions. Examples are *Ifa* divination verses, which amount to 256 chapters of text.

Similar to the oral traditions, the arts of architecture, design, sculpture, textiles, dance, drumming, and music function as sacred "texts," transmitting and reinforcing traditional religions for new generations. The arts are used to convey feelings, illustrate proverbs, express the wisdom of the people, and give spiritual meaning and function to inanimate objects. Shrines and temples are adorned with elaborate carved images of the deities that convey the power of the gods and ancestors. Rites of passage are particularly important in the religious use of arts. Carved totemic and ritual objects may serve as important sources of knowledge for the newly initiated. Masks, costumes, and body design accompany religious ceremonies.

Like all elements of African traditional religion, artistic expressions are integrated with everyday life. African arts and religious meaning overlap in visual symbols, music, dance, proverbs, riddles, names of people and places, myths, legends, beliefs, and customs. In this sense, every member of society contributes to the religion's living oral "texts."

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